

Jeanne Batalova  
Department of Sociology  
UC Irvine  
[jbatalov@uci.edu](mailto:jbatalov@uci.edu)

## **Double Disadvantage among Immigrant Women in the U.S. Highly Skilled<sup>1</sup> Labor Market**

Comparative economic performance of various groups of workers has been a topic of interest among scholars, activists, and policy makers for a long time (Cotter, Hermsen et al. 1999; NSF 2002; Cotter, Hermsen et al. 2003). Since minority and immigrant groups often experience disadvantages in the labor market, it has profound implications for the economic and social well-being of these groups and their families. Extensive research demonstrates that women tend to have fewer opportunities in gaining access to jobs they qualify for in terms of their education or training (Reskin and Roos 1990; Altonji and Blanck 1999), experience higher levels of unemployment (De Jong and Madamba 2001) as well as are paid less than men (Baron and Newman 1989; NSF 2002; Cohen and Huffman 2003). Similarly, racial and ethnic minorities are not only outperformed by their white counterparts (Amott and Matthael 1996; Altonji and Blanck 1999; Cotter, Hermsen et al. 1999; De Jong and Madamba 2001) but also face hiring discrimination from the employers (Kirscherman and Neckerman 1991; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Immigrants, especially newly arrived, face barriers as well in the labor market that prompt some groups to choose self-employment (Lee 2000). However, workers are not distinctly females, immigrants, or racial minorities; it is a combination of race, class, gender, and nativity statuses that creates complex realities, opportunities and obstacles for them at workplace (Bean and Lowell 2003).

The recent emphasis on the importance of knowledge, skills, and technologies in post-industrialized economies has brought the highly skilled component of U.S. immigration flows under scrutiny. A growing number of studies attempt to explain the social and economic contributions and integration of high skilled immigrants (Borjas 1994; Alarcon

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper I use educational attainment (having a bachelor or higher degree) as a proxy for highly skilled or skilled.

1999; Lowell 1999; Cornelius, Thomas J. Espenshade et al. 2001). Comparative economic performance of the highly skilled workers is an interesting case because of the assumption that in a merit-based society, education, training, and efforts (achieved characteristics) could overpower ascribed characteristics such as being female, foreign-born, or racial-ethnic minority.

To shed light on a broader issue of differences in remuneration of workers for their efforts at work, I chose to focus on a particular group, highly skilled immigrant women. Using this case as my analytical tool, I intend to show how the intersection of gender and nativity affects one's earning potential in the U.S. labor market.

### **Research Questions**

Many European countries, Australia, Canada, and the United States, have been actively promoting, or at least considering, an increase in foreign worker flows, whether to meet the demands of their economies, offset an aging population, or in many cases both. The United States has a long history of “brain gain” from immigrants who were doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs, and teachers among others (Liu 1992). The economic boom of the 1990s highlighted the importance of skilled workforce once again. American companies successfully lobbied Congress to increase the number of highly skilled immigrants pointing to a shortage in skilled segment of the domestic workforce and the significant economic and social contributions made by professionals who are immigrants.

While the characteristics and experiences of the highly skilled workers become the subject of recent inquires, little research has been devoted to the experiences of 49 percent of professional labor force – women. As Bean and Lowell (2003) point out, to get a fuller picture of today's labor market dynamics, one needs to take into account race/ethnicity, nativity, and gender as well as labor market context (see also Boyd 1984, Rajjman and Semyonov 1997, Pedraza 1991). Students of economic inequality offered many explanations for groups' differences in labor market outcomes. Continuing this tradition, my research addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) Controlling for individual characteristics and structural factors, do immigrant highly skilled women face greater hardships in the labor market compared to other skilled workers (immigrant men, native-born men and women). More

specifically, are immigrant women at “double disadvantage” in terms of their earning potential?

The double disadvantage hypothesis suggests that women who are immigrants will be worse off in terms of their economic outcomes than immigrant men or native-born women and men. Therefore, one would expect to find significant influence of being a female and being an immigrant as determinants of low earnings net of human capital, industry, and occupation variables.

2) What factors tend to aggravate and alleviate these economic disadvantages? In particular, are there significant variations in labor market experiences of women-professionals by race/ethnicity as well as local labor markets?

First, this paper will provide a detailed examination of demographic and social characteristics of the college educated workers in the United States. And second, using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), I will investigate the effect of workers’ human capital characteristics as well as job characteristics on the earnings among various groups of highly skilled workers paying special attention on how one’s gender and immigrant status determine person’s labor market outcomes.