

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“It's like you're always an outsider”: International student spouses’ meaning making of identities in the U.S.A.

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Abstract

International students’ spouses remain understudied within higher education research. Their experiences are shaped by intersecting forces of gender, immigration policy, and legal dependency that warrant greater scholarly attention. This narrative inquiry examines how international students’ wives adjust to life in the United States and navigate challenges associated with the F-2 dependent visa policy, which prohibits spouses of F-1 students from working. Guided by expatriate spousal adjustment theory, we interviewed 19 women accompanying their husbands to a large research university in the southeastern United States. Using narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, we examined participants’ stories through the dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality. Findings highlight three interconnected aspects of adjustment: navigating cultural differences, developing community to address loneliness, and experiencing the personal consequences of F-2 visa work restrictions. Participants described how employment restrictions contributed to financial strain, social isolation, disrupted career trajectories, diminished independence, and the loss of

professional and personal identities. Although participants built community, pursued future goals, and developed strategies to support their well-being, these responses could not fully overcome the structural constraints imposed by their immigration status. We argue that international student spousal adjustment should not be understood solely as an individual or interpersonal process; it is also shaped by gendered expectations, legal dependency, and U.S. immigration policy. By extending discussions of international student mobility beyond international students, this study raises questions about F-2 employment restrictions and the role of higher education institutions in supporting international students' spouses.

Keywords: International education, International Student Spouses, Dependent Visa, Cultural adjustment

Introduction

In the 2023-2024 academic year, 1,126,690 international students studied in the United States, which is a record high (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024). International graduate students (who totaled 502,291) showed a growth of 7.6% over the previous year (IIE, 2024). Although international students, both graduate and undergraduate, have become a permanent fixture of the U.S. higher education landscape, it is important to continuously reevaluate how international education is implemented in the United States (Cai & Leask, 2024; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013) to ensure it is supporting and meeting the needs of all parties involved.

This reevaluation of how international education is implemented and supported in the United States should include, among other contributing factors, a historically under-researched population: spouses of international students. Because graduate students tend to be older than traditionally aged undergraduate students, many may bring their spouses and families when they come to study in the United States. Family and community are often considered to be one of the most important aspects of individuals' lives, and for this reason, the experiences of the spouses and families may significantly influence the academic experience of international students. However, there is limited research on the spouses and families of international students.

Providing support to students' families is a common practice at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States because of the connection between family support and student success (Luedke et al., 2024; Self, 2013). Although these offices exist, spouses do not typically receive any curated support as a part of the university's efforts to support students' families (Campbell & Prins, 2016). International student and scholar support offices, typically tasked with addressing all needs for international students, do not always have standardized practices in the support of international spouses and families. The level of support for spouses within this type of office ranges from campus to campus, but even for those that do intentionally support spouses, the amount of effort an office can dedicate to this population may come second to the immigration and academic compliance work they must complete for international students.

Furthermore, international students' spouses face unique challenges that influence their well-being as individuals, in large part due to their visas' work restrictions. With an increase in the understanding of and improvement in support offered, the experience of both

the spouse and international student can be enhanced. When discussing spouses of international students, it is important to note that this population “throughout the history of American higher education has been and continues to be female” (Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012, p. 63). While prior literature and our sample largely reflect heterosexual relationships in which women accompany male international students, this pattern is not neutral and does not represent the full range of relationship structures among international student families; rather, it reflects broader heteronormative and gendered structures embedded in immigration policy and higher education.

To accompany an international student, a spouse or child must obtain a F-1-dependent (F-2) or J-1-dependent (J-2) visa. Among other restrictions, F-2 and J-2 visas prohibit the adult holder from obtaining employment or full-time education (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2024). Compounded with challenges that come along with transitioning to a new country, the inability to establish oneself in the United States through a job or education may lead to questions of identity and feelings of anxiety, isolation, and sadness among spouses of international students (De Verthelyi, 1995). The impact of these feelings can be felt by both the spouse and international student, which likely influences all areas of their lives, including academics.

An exploration of the experiences of spouses of international students in the United States can lead to increased understanding of the specific needs of this population, which can result in more tailored support for this population. The tailored support is especially important within contemporary global challenges related to shifting and confusing immigration policies from the current U.S. presidential administration (Gary & Gluckman, 2025). In this study, international student spouses are defined as adult partners who accompany an international student to the United States on a dependent visa (e.g., F-2 or J-2) while the student is enrolled in a U.S. institution of higher education. Although spouses of all genders may hold dependent visas, this study focuses specifically on women spouses, reflecting both the demographics of the population and the gendered nature of visa-related work and education restrictions. The purpose of this study is to explore the stories and experiences of international students’ wives during their transition to the United States. This study seeks to understand the overall experiences of international students’ wives in the United States and is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do international students’ spouses adjust when transitioning to the United States? (2) What challenges arise from this transition, and how do these individuals navigate these challenges?

Literature Review

There are many challenges faced by spouses of international students, and although they do not greatly differ from those faced by international students themselves, there is a significant difference in the amount of support that is available to them through HEIs. As a result, the challenges can continue to negatively impact them for the duration of their time in the United States. The experiences of spouses of international students have been examined through the lens of their role as “invisible sojourners” (De Verthelyi, 1995; Sakamoto, 2006) as well as through an evaluation of the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of their adjustment (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025; Campbell & Prins, 2016; Chen, 2009; Hopkins, 2026; Lee, 2025; Plett Martens & Grant, 2008; Sandbulte, 2024; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Many of

the challenges that are unique to the spouses of international students are a result of the visa restrictions in place, namely the inability to pursue employment or full-time education. This can cause spouses to experience a question of identity and gender roles as well as financial concerns (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025; Bordoloi, 2015; Jiang et al, 2021; Lee, 2025; Myers-Walls et al, 2011; Plett Martens & Grant, 2008).

Despite the influence visa restrictions can have on the barriers faced by spouses, most of the literature on the experience of international students' spouses does not make an explicit connection with the immigration regulations as a contributing factor (Bordoloi, 2015). Although a change in visa policies may be out of the control of scholars in the field of international education, highlighting the direct influence of these policies on the well-being of spouses of international students would fill a current gap in the literature.

Question of identity and gender roles

To better understand the challenges of identity that international spouses face, it is important to know more about the characteristics of international students' spouses. In addition to mainly being women, it is evident from the literature that many of the wives are highly educated and career-driven (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995; Hopkins, 2026; Lee, 2025; Sakamoto, 2006; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). As a result of the visa restrictions, they are faced with the challenge of redefining their identity for the duration of their time in the United States, which can last for many years. Without the ability to further their career via work or education, spouses often find themselves in a more domestic role and are left to "provide reproductive labor—ranging from biological reproduction to maintaining the household on a daily basis" (Kim, 2010, p. 291). Depending on the gender norms of a couple prior to moving to the United States to study, this can be a stark difference in roles and expectations for the spouses.

Recent literature argues that, regardless of how wives feel about this shift in role, the fact that this choice is made for them based on immigration regulations suggests the presence of a systemic issue that is rooted in "restrictive gender ideologies" (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025; Hopkins, 2026; Jiang et al, 2021; Jiang et al, 2018). Additionally, due to the classification of international students' spouses as dependents, the literature suggests that spouses often feel useless and that they are "just a spouse" (Jiang et al., 2021, p. 945). Participants in a study by Cho et al. (2005) reported feeling like victims, unable to control their own lives and felt a "sense of deprivation" due to their restriction to the role of homemaker (p. 907). Chen (2009) found that wives of international students were often unhappy with their singular status as a housewife and wanted to return to the workplace. Ultimately, they had to develop coping strategies to deal with their loss of identity. In addition, Myers-Walls et al. (2011) found that decreased power and a loss of professional role are contributing factors to the stress that is uniquely faced by spouses of international students.

Financial concerns

Concerns about finances are one of the most common challenges faced by international students and their spouses (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025; Hopkins, 2026; Mori, 2000; Lee, 2025; Plett Martens & Grant, 2008). Due to visa restrictions, neither the international student (F-1 visa) nor their dependents (F-2 visa) are permitted to work. Some exceptions

may be granted for the international student such as an on-campus job or off-campus internship but because of their non-resident status, there is little financial aid or scholarship available to them (Yan & Berliner, 2013). For couples that were both employed in their home country, studying in the United States may mean a difficult adjustment to living off only one income. In a study to better understand the adjustment of Asian international student spouses and parents in the United States, Myers-Walls et al. (2011) interviewed 20 participants and found that, although many experienced financial concerns, such concerns existed in different contexts. Some couples felt stress because they were unable to maintain the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. Others felt stress because there was an expectation that they split their resources among family members in their home country.

Although international students typically qualify for health insurance coverage through their HEI, the spouse is typically not covered due to the high cost (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). This was echoed in the findings of Jiang et al. (2021), in which they interviewed a total of 20 participants. Jiang et al. (2021) found that “spouses and children are charged around \$4,000 dollars per year for health insurance, while graduate students, with the university employee benefits, pay \$200 dollars” (p. 945), therefore leading some couples to save money by not purchasing health insurance for the spouse. This can lead to significant stress, especially in the case that a medical need or emergency arises.

The financial concerns and the question of identity faced by spouses of international students are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are both a cause and effect of one another. An inability to work, due to visa restrictions, can lead to an inability to financially contribute to the household, which both challenges the spouses’ understanding of their identity and furthers financial concerns that the couple may be facing.

Theoretical Framework

To best answer our research questions, we used a theoretical lens that allowed us to situate the new realities that international student spouses face as they take on a new life in the United States. In light of this, we utilized expatriate spousal adjustment theory as our theoretical framework. While there is no universal understanding of the term expatriate (McNulty & Brewster, 2016), it typically refers to individuals who are sent on behalf of their employer to conduct business in a different country for a set period of time. During this process, the employed individual’s family may choose to move with them to the host country. Given the importance of spousal support during this process, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) developed the expatriate spousal adjustment theory to better understand the dimensions involved in how expatriate spouses adjust (or do not adjust) when moving to a new host country.

Although expatriate spousal adjustment theory has been widely used to understand the experiences of spouses accompanying internationally mobile employees, to our knowledge, its application to international student spouses has received little scholarly attention. Research on international student spouses has generally emphasized identity, gender roles, social integration, and well-being rather than drawing explicitly on expatriate spousal adjustment theory. Accordingly, this study extends the framework into a higher education context while examining its applicability and limitations for understanding the experiences of international student spouses.

At the same time, expatriate spousal adjustment theory is not without its limitations. As Peltonen (2006) has discussed, the framing of “successful” spousal adjustment is typically situated as a personal experience of the spouse and fails to consider the ways in which social and cultural structures shape this process. Moreover, the very term “expat” originates from predominately European colonizers moving to new countries (McNulty & Brewster, 2016). We acknowledge the potential concerns in leveraging a framework to analyze the experiences of international student spouses that was originally designed to understand expatriate adjustment.

The three dimensions of this theory (interaction, cultural, and personal) aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the many inputs, experiences, and opportunities that influence expatriate spousal adjustment. As Shaffer and Harrison (2001) articulated, “interaction adjustment specifically refers to relationships or interpersonal associations with host country nationals” (p. 239). While Shaffer and Harrison (2001) categorize interaction adjustment as strictly interactions with individuals in the host country, we expanded our framing of interactions to be inclusive of any exchange (e.g., an interaction with another F-2 visa holder, faculty member, etc.) that contributed to their adjustment experience. The cultural adjustment dimension “refers to adaption to various environmental and situational conditions such as local customs and transportation” (p. 239). We kept this criterion of the spousal adjustment theory in line with its original articulation. Finally, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) outlined the personal dimension of adjustment as “a sense of becoming part of, belonging to, or feeling at home in a foreign environment” (p. 239). However, we chose to include all internal processes and reflections (e.g., emotions, future personal career plans, etc.) about moving to the United States regardless of whether the content was positive or not.

However, we feel the framework is still appropriate for two primary reasons. First, similar to international student spouses, expatriate spouses often leave their careers to be with their spouse and face work restrictions upon entering their new country, often causing a shift in spousal identity. An important distinction between the two is that international students coming to the United States are coming primarily for an education, while expatriates are moving to a new country to work, presumably for a higher amount of pay, at least in comparison to graduate student stipends. Second, the three dimensions in this theory—interaction, cultural, and personal—are a useful way of understanding the holistic spousal adjustment to living in the United States.

While this framework offers a useful structure, it does not fully capture how gendered, racialized, and immigration-based power structures shape spouses’ experiences; thus, we also integrated an intersectional feminist lens into our analysis. This additional theory allows us to analyze how each aspect of participants’ identities and social locations shapes their experiences of dependency, belonging, and adjustment within the United States. As Crenshaw (1991) explained, intersectional feminist theory emphasizes how overlapping systems of power, such as gender, race, class, and immigration status, shape individuals’ lived experiences in interconnected ways. This lens not only highlights structural constraints but also attends to how individuals exercise agency within and against these conditions. Rather than positioning participants as passive recipients of structural forces, an intersectional approach allows us to examine how international student spouses actively navigate visa restrictions and gendered expectations in ways that both reproduce and resist these systems.

Methodology & Methods

We used narrative inquiry to frame the experiences of international students' wives. This method allowed us to explore ideas around culture and changing contexts due to transition of space and public and private roles. Specifically, our analytical procedure relied on Clandinin's (2013) three dimensions of temporality (e.g., time), space (e.g., context), and sociality (e.g., interpersonal interactions). Approaching this study narratively is appropriate because, as stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), our participants' experiences are "filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (p. 17). Using narrative inquiry also allowed us space to work with participants to envision and imagine futures that might lead to a more welcoming and supportive higher education context for international students' wives.

Participant recruitment and data collection procedures

We used purposeful sampling and interviewed 19 international students' wives from a large research institution in the southeast United States. Participants self-identified as woman/female and represent the Asian (13), African (4), South American (1), and European (1) continents. All participants accompanied their husbands to the United States, where their husbands began graduate programs as international students. A more detailed breakdown of the participants' demographic information including their pseudonym, age, continent of origin, number of children, and length of time living in the United States can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym (selected by participants)	Age	Continent	Length of time in United States	Number of children
Ashbeauty	34	Africa	4 years	3
Cam	28	South America	2 years	0
Favor	31	Africa	2 years	1
freedom	40	Asia	4 months	2
Jenny	29	Asia	2 years	0
Lamz	30	Asia	21 months	0

Mercy		Africa	8 months	0
Mercy2	24	Africa	4 months now	0
Miya	25	Asia	9 months	0
Natasha	27	Asia	8 months	0
Pinky	27	Asia	1.4 years	0
Rebekka	37	Europe	5.5 years	3
S	24 years 9 months	Asia	2.5 months	0
Serendipity	32	Asia	19 months	0
Shorna	34	Asia	2 years	1
Sofia	30	Asia	5 months	0
Suli	30	Asia	3 and half years	0
Summer	30	Asia	2 and a half months	0
Tana	30	Asia	July 2023 will be 6 years	1

We invited each participant to speak with us twice in order to gain deeper understanding of their experiences in the United States. Of the 19 participants, five chose not to return for a second interview. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes, and interviews would range from 30-60 minutes. All interviews were conducted either on Zoom, on the phone, or in person, depending on the participants' preferences.

During each interview, participants were asked questions that reflected Clandinin's (2013) three dimensions of temporality, space, and sociality. Examples of questions include, "How have these experiences as a wife of a student in the United States informed your identity?" and "What are the biggest challenges you've faced since coming to the United States?" Questions centered around reflections on the decision to move to the United States

as well as the actual experiences they had once arriving. We also centered our questions on the social and community aspect of their time in the United States.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

We constructed temporal narratives for each participant that included their backgrounds prior to coming to the United States to their current experiences. Following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) analytical procedures, we first moved from field texts, which were participant interview transcripts, to interim texts. With the field texts, we first cleaned up all transcripts to ensure that the audio and text recordings were accurate before creating the interim texts, which were our initial constructed narratives. We constructed interim texts for each participant that took a temporal structure—as in, we started with participants' pre-arrival background and then drafted narrative sections that led up to their current experiences. We also focused on including space/contexts and attended to sociality/interactions that participants had throughout their journey. We then uploaded all interim texts into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis software.

We recognize that narrative inquiry may not always include a traditional coding process. However, we contend that throughout the process, we were thinking “narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) while engaging in thematic analysis of the narratives, which mirrors Clandinin et al.'s (2015) thematic analysis of early career teachers' attrition. To ensure trustworthiness, we engaged in intercoder agreement for our data analysis process. With a team of four, we chose two interim texts that we would each individually code using descriptive coding, which included words or short phrases that identified the topic (Saldaña, 2016). We then met and went through each interim text, discussing how and why we coded certain passages with specific labels. After our discussion of each text, we came to an agreement on how we would code the subsequent transcripts in an effort to ensure that our “individual coding efforts harmonize” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 36). We then continued to code the rest of the interim texts with descriptive coding, and when completed, we met as a research team to engage in second cycle coding, which included reorganizing and restructuring the first cycle codes. We engaged in pattern coding in our second cycle coding process which allowed for grouping codes into categorical codes (Saldaña, 2016). Our coding process moved the interim texts, which were works in progress, into research texts by re-examining and creating a story with the data within the categorical codes. The research texts are structured in what Clandinin et al. (2019) described as narrative threads, which are patterns that echo across multiple narratives, and are presented as the findings in this manuscript.

Researcher reflexivity

The first author is a white woman who is interested in exploring how marginalized populations develop a sense of belonging within institutions of higher education. As a wife and mother, she shares some identities with the participants, which further motivates her to conduct this study to learn from and advocate for this often-overlooked population. The second author is a white woman from New York City who is interested in issues related to equity and inclusion. Specifically, she is interested in coalition building and better understanding how minoritized populations are either positively or negatively impacted by institutions of higher education. The third author identifies as a heterosexual white male who is an experiential educator and researcher, as well as a public health practitioner. Through his

professional role, he often works with international students to secure graduate assistantships and is all too familiar with the lack of institutional support that international students and their families receive. These professional experiences drew him to participate in research that could ultimately improve the lives of international students and their spouses. The fourth author identifies as an Asian American woman faculty who grew up hearing stories of adjustment to the United States from her parents. As the daughter of immigrants from British colonial Hong Kong, this author is greatly influenced by layers of transnationalism, coloniality, gender, and race in her research. Data is always interpreted through the lens of the researchers. As a diverse group, our backgrounds and experiences allowed us to engage in deep meaning-making of our participants' narratives. We continually engaged in meaningful discussion throughout the data collection and analysis processes to sensitize ourselves to participants' narratives and our interpretations.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the study, we identified two major ethical issues that we tried to navigate sensitively. First, while we maintained a critical hope that the study will make positive change, we wanted to be careful not to give our participants unrealistic expectations of the changes we would be able to make institutionally. As Latz (2017) cautions, we did not want to plant "Seeds of hope within participants that will never blossom" (p. 112). Our second major ethical concern was related to the level of sensitivity of the information participants shared with us. They were deeply open and vulnerable with what they shared about marriages, family, immigration status, and views on the United States (including thoughts on politics, society, and culture). Therefore, we did our best to be thoughtful in protecting their confidentiality and used a member-checking process that gave them some control and final input in what we share in the following sections.

Findings

Drawing upon Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) model of expatriate spousal adjustment, this study provides insight into the three sources of adjustment (cultural, interaction, and personal) that our participants displayed while reflecting upon their transition to the United States. Although the findings are arranged in three distinct groupings based on the theoretical framework, there is some overlap in the participants' experience. The findings include the varied reactions to cultural differences between their home country and the United States, the importance of community to participants' transition, and the challenges faced due to visa work restrictions.

Navigating cultural differences in the United States

Most of the participants made some mention of cultural differences impacting their experience in the United States. Overall, the "differences" discussed were experienced both positively and negatively by participants, particularly in areas of social interactions, safety, and religious holidays. For example, the participants compared the overall characteristics/dispositions of the people they have met in the United States to those of people from their home country. There were some positive reflections on the people participants had met. Shorna was thankful for the "mom friends" she made in her

neighborhood because without her family with her, she then had people she could turn to for advice. Freedom shared that “the people were very, really cool, they’re really helpful,” and Rebekka said, “I like how polite people are here. They’re very polite.” Regardless of whether highlighting deeper relationships like Shorna or more perfunctory interactions like Freedom and Rebekka, for these participants, the relationships they built and the interactions with people around them had a positive influence on their adjustment to the United States.

Many other participants described a surface level kindness but questioned the genuineness of their interactions with U.S. Americans. One participant, Tana, felt that people in the United States “are very nice ...warm, [and] welcoming,” often offering a “very beautiful smile” in small social exchanges, but she felt they lack sincerity in connecting with others. Similarly, Natasha shared that people in the United States do not want to have as much conversation because they are “more concerned about themselves” than people from her home country. Regardless of the degree to which participants had relationships with people in the United States, the cultural differences in interactions between them were present.

Safety

Like the topic of people, the subject of personal safety was perceived differently among participants. Mercy2 shared some contradicting feelings about police in the United States. Mercy2 commented that one of the things she wishes her home country, Nigeria, was better at was safety. During her time in the United States, she

discovered the government cares about everyone—at least based on what I can see. In this country if you see someone in danger, you call 911. In my country, you call God first because the police are not going to help you.

Mercy2’s experience in the United States differed from her experience in Nigeria where she shared that the police are corrupt. Later in the conversation, however, she talked about feeling nervous about police in the United States interacting with her. “They look scary and from movies I’ve seen them shoot someone and it be a mistake. Would that happen to me?” Although Mercy2 identified differences between her home and the United States in regard to safety, she was still seeking to understand the actual reality of police and government protection in U.S. culture.

Another participant, Serendipity, described feeling fearful and unsafe for the first time when she was in the United States because in her home country, Korea, there are security cameras everywhere and citizens cannot carry a gun. However, in the United States she sometimes feels uncomfortable because “I know that someone could have a gun, and some people act aggressively.” Participants’ experience of safety in the United States varied based on the safety they experienced in their home countries. Ultimately, the feeling and perception of safety, although varied, was a cultural difference that played a role in participants’ transition to and experience in the United States.

Religious holidays and food

Some of the cultural differences experienced by participants were exacerbated by their shift to being in the religious “minority” of the population upon transitioning to the United States. Suli observed differences that she attributed to the fact that she is from a country that largely practices Islam. Natasha shared that in her country, there are days off that align with holidays and religious observances that she practices but she compared that to being “minors” here, so their religion is often not reflected in days off. However, she and her husband have enjoyed Black Friday and other days off while living in the United States.

Like religion, the difference in food presented some challenges for participants. Mercy² shared that a big challenge she experienced when she moved to the United States was getting used to the food. She had a hard time finding food that tasted good to her, and that made her transition even harder. Eventually, she and her husband found some food that she liked, which led her to say, “Ah, that means I can live here. I can survive!” Although they faced challenges in doing so, it was important for many participants to find culinary options from their culture in the United States to ease their transition.

Opportunities for education and work

Lastly, some comments from participants highlight that in comparison to their home countries, there is a perception that the United States offers more opportunities for education and work. Suli noted that in her country, “only a small amount of women work, actually, they did not get enough chance like [they do in] this country.” Another participant, S, thought it was wonderful that the U.S. government allows people to work longer and said that “I think that the U.S. has become *the* U.S. [emphasis added] in the whole world just because of this [approach to] work.” Natasha shared that a part of the motivation for her and her husband to move here was because in her home country, Bangladesh, “the undergraduate education is good, but once you get past that level, it is not as strong.” In other words, Natasha and her partner value the array of opportunities for higher education and increased access to jobs compared to their home country. Participants made note of the differences they perceived in the way education was valued and implemented between their home country and the United States.

Importance of community to combat loneliness

International students’ wives consistently highlighted the importance that community plays in overcoming the challenges of their visa restrictions. In fact, some, such as Shorna, felt that finding community was the most important step that wives could take outside of changing their visa status when moving to the United States. Natasha echoed these sentiments when encouraging others to “reach out and find community so that you do not feel helpless or alone.” Both encouraged other incoming international students’ wives to connect with other international students and their spouses to create a support system and prevent loneliness.

Natasha, Miya, Suli, S, Ashbeauty, and Freedom all found community with other women from their respective countries, which provides them with a meaningful source of connection. Yet participants created community with more than just those in similar visa situations. In fact, several participants, such as Shorna and Ashbeauty, connected with members outside of the university setting as well. Shorna started babysitting for a family,

which developed into a friendship with the family. The family in turn has introduced her to other families in the neighborhood, which “has become a blessing for me.” Shorna routinely turns to these families for advice and support, which has become a key part of her successfully adjusting to life in the United States. Relatedly, while Ashbeauty, an African international student, feels the most comfortable with international students because “we have the same culture,” she also highlighted that she developed a friendship with an African American woman which she greatly values because “whenever I’m sad or something, I have someone to talk to ... we are like family. We are very close, like a sister.” When considering her newfound community, she feels that “we made a little family.” Thus, for Ashbeauty, as well as other participants, building community is essential to easing the transition to life in the United States

Inability to work

Multiple participants shared that due to their inability to work, they have felt isolated and lonely. For many, simultaneous factors led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, including being in a new place, not working, their husbands being busy with school, and being far from home and family. For example, Mercy shared that when she was in her home country, she enjoyed interacting with friends, but she is not able to do that as much in the United States. Mercy said, “It has been difficult because there is no platform to meet people.” Similarly, Summer shared, “Now he [her husband] works, so I feel it’s really hard to make or find some new people. Yeah, so I think I’m pretty isolated.” Favor has also found that she is not able to socialize as much as she would like because she is “not working, so... mostly I’m home”. It is clear that the inability to work has an isolating effect that leads to negative emotions, such as loneliness, for international student wives.

The change in spousal roles when couples come to the United States underscores the importance of connecting with community in a new country. Many of the participants in our study had little to no existing social support in the areas to which they moved. For the person who is enrolled at the university, most of their time is occupied being a full-time student, leaving little time to spend with their spouses. The persons holding the F-2 visas tend to be full-time caretakers for their family and rarely leave the house, which makes their lack of community even more severe. Pinky highlighted this point by sharing that without the ability to work, it is difficult “to make new friends and connect with others.” While several participants noted that they developed a sense of community through the international families they met through their husbands, some, such as Sofia, said they felt otherwise: Sofia said she viewed these connections to be more her husband’s community than hers.

Personal challenges from visa work restrictions

Participants’ experiences as wives of international students included the influence of work restrictions on their identity and the consistent pursuit of future goals. Many of the participants are highly educated and found meaning in their careers prior to moving to the United States. Participants were in career fields ranging from medicine to engineering to education. Most participants had worked hard to achieve their career goals, found them to be meaningful aspects of their lives, and expressed a connection between how they viewed their identity and their careers.

Upon transitioning to the United States, participants became unable to work because of their visa status, which caused frustration for many participants. Additionally, some participants shared that it was more difficult to gain experience outside of formal work, for example, through volunteering and research, than they thought it would be. In addition to the root frustration of not working, some participants were also frustrated that because they were not able to work, they were not able to contribute to their families financially.

A large cultural difference mentioned frequently was the work restrictions participants faced in the United States because of their F-2 visa status. Beyond feelings of frustration, disappointment, and confusion as to the reason for the restriction, participants shared specific challenges they faced because of the restrictions, including financial struggles, career trajectory implications, and the disruption to their identity and mental health. Sofia shared that she could not understand a reason that international students and spouses are not allowed to work, saying, "I don't think it's okay even for students, they need some experience in their life and they need money for that. Not everybody can come from a good family who have good money, right?" From her perspective, everyone can benefit from gaining work experience, but with the current work restrictions in place, those who come to the United States without a financial cushion are especially disadvantaged, which is unfair. She also pointed out that her inability to work puts a "heavy burden" on her husband to earn enough money for both of them, which leads to unfair stress on them as a couple, in addition to the reinforcement of typical gender stereotypes.

Influence on Identity

Several participants talked about viewing their identity differently after their transition to the United States and their newfound inability to work. For example, Shorna said,

I was a free bird and now I feel like a bird without the wings. I can't work, don't go outside and every single thing, I have to ask for. That I never used to do at home. It's a disaster. Like you feel like, just like you have never studied, or you never did nothing. You are just a homemaker forever."

As Shorna expressed, being excluded from the world of work feels limiting to some of the participants and changes the way they view themselves. Similarly, Summer shared how the limitations on her work influence her: "I feel I become more physically smaller. When I was in Korea, I had my job, I had my position in my workplace because I made my money. I could buy what I wanted there." Thus, Summer sacrificed core elements of her identity when moving to the United States. Another participant, Lamz, shared, "Like before coming here, I had an identity of my own. But now people know me as 'his wife.' I mean apart from that if someone sees me like, oh you are his wife then I'm happy with it. But when it comes to my identity—that's not my only identity. That makes me a little depressed and sad." Lamz's story is representative of what many of the participants shared about their shifts in identity.

Many participants had to navigate what it means for them to be associated with one identity (i.e., "his wife") but not as a person with a multitude of identities. Additionally, the shift in participants' self-perception of their identity seems to occur while their husband's identity is also shifting. Some participants spoke about falling behind their husbands in their

careers. Rebekka shared the sentiment of her friend, the wife of an international student, who said “so many years I was nothing. And then when I was able to work, I’m on the beginning part while my spouse is, like, so far ahead of me.” This sentiment was shared by other participants and highlights the influence of work restrictions not only on how participants feel in the moment, but also on their long-term career trajectory and their perceptions of their career trajectory. As women in the workforce, their gender has the potential to be a disadvantage to career advancement, which makes the pause in their career trajectory even more dire.

Negotiating their identity

Although participants were unable to work, they maintained goals connected to additional education and career advancement. Several participants talked about deferring their goals until after their husbands achieved their goals or after their children were older. For example, Shorna shared that eventually, she hopes to pursue another degree, “maybe after she (her daughter) goes to school. I can start again and gather myself to do something.” The hope of one day pursuing her career is a hope-inspiring concept for Shorna. For several participants, there seems to be a connection between their pursuit of goals and a desire to reclaim their identity in the world of work. For example, Lamz shared that one reason she is so determined to pass her tests and gain her medical license in the U.S. is to gain back the identity that she lost in the move to the U.S.

Cam shared that her emotions change day to day: “It’s like one day, I’m good, and then my emotions are on the floor.” Lamz shared that even though she has her studies to occupy her time, and that overall their lives are good in the United States, it can be depressing at times living this way. Several participants also navigated homesickness, missing family, friends, and food from home, without much distraction, since they spend most of their time at home due to visa work restrictions. Some participants also shared that they missed their family very badly but were unable to visit home due to financial constraints.

Central to many of these emotional struggles was the inability to work, which disrupted participants’ daily routines and sense of purpose. For example, Lamz shared that because of her inability to work, she is constantly bored, which never occurred in Bangladesh. Some participants shared that in the United States they feel isolated. Shorna said, “But here you are doing everything alone. Every single thing. So, you are scared all the time. What if what you’re doing something wrong?” The challenges of transitioning to a new place seem to be exacerbated by distance from a support system and work restrictions. Each of these three experiences—moving to a new country, being without your support system, and unemployment—are challenging on their own, so when they are all combined, it makes for an overwhelming situation.

Discussion and Implications

This study provides in-depth insight into the participants’ experiences and the cultural, personal, and interaction factors of their adjustment. The findings from our study echo previous research that claims that international students’ spouses face challenges in their transition due to a lack of family or social support system (De Verthelyi, 1995; Misra et al, 2003). For example, many participants spoke to this being the first time in their lives that

they were not with family members every day. This of course was challenging for them, but they also spoke to the community of friends they had built as being something that helped fill that gap.

This especially came into play when observing holidays, which they often did with the other international students and spouses they befriended. Although it is not a full replacement for family, this study suggests that international students' spouses are not completely without support systems, but that the community they build with one another can provide mutual benefits and comfort. In fact, some of these friend connections may sometimes be more impactful than family because the shared experience between spouses provides much needed validation and affirmation of their challenges, insights, and coping strategies.

As we observed in many of our participants, their F-2 visa restrictions resulted in shifts in their identity and how they understood themselves and their role(s) in both their marriage and society. This study echoes existing literature that attributes a spouse's change in their identity to their F-2 visa work restrictions (Cho et al., 2005; Jiang et al. 2018; Kim, 2010). Most participants were highly educated and held careers prior to moving to the United States, which made the confinement to their homes even more jarring. Some participants resented their forced dependency on their husbands to make purchases, drive places, or to access their own healthcare information. Others were disheartened by their inability to give back to society and feel fulfilled. As stated in the expatriate spousal adjustment theory (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), interactions with others and personal factors such as self-efficacy contribute to expatriate spouses' adjustment. However, participants' narratives suggest that these processes cannot be understood as purely individual or interpersonal. Rather, adjustment is shaped by intersecting structural forces such as gendered expectations, racialized experiences, and visa-based dependency. This connects to Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping structures of power shape individuals' lived experiences in ways that cannot be understood through a single identity such as gender or race alone. These forces constrain the forms of agency available to international students' spouses. In this way, disruptions to participants' sense of self, particularly in relation to others, reflect not only personal challenges but also broader systemic conditions that structure their everyday lives.

An interesting finding of this study was the act of goal setting as a coping mechanism for the challenges international students' spouses were experiencing. Although participants were not permitted to work, many of them created new ways to spend their time and energy instead such as studying for medical licensure, writing a book, and practicing art. One of the participants, S, articulated this exact notion in her interview when she said that it is important that international students' spouses "be engaged in some type of task, hobby, etc. to keep [their] brains sharp and to combat depression." Most participants made mention of their own mental health struggles and/or the high rate of depression among their fellow F-2 visa holders almost matter-of-factly, implying it was much more the norm than the exception. The high rate of depression among F-2 visa holders is evident across the literature (Banjong, 2015; Chen, 2009; Myers-Walls et al., 2011), but the coping strategies used by international students' spouses are not as commonly discussed. This finding affirms the challenge that the work restrictions present to spouses but also displays their acts of resiliency for their self-preservation. Viewed through an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw, 1991), these

practices can be understood as forms of agency that both navigate and subtly resist the structural constraints imposed by their F-2 visa status.

Implications for policy and practice

This section includes recommendations for both policy and practice. Our primary recommendation is a change to the policies associated with the F-2 visa, which places restrictions on international students' spouses' work and education. We believe that HEIs and staff in leadership positions should work together to advocate for a change in this policy. Lifting the restrictions on international students' spouses' work and education would positively affect not only this population, but also campus and local communities.

We also make four recommendations at the institutional level. First, we recommend that institutions develop an organization for international students' spouses to build a community with one another. In many of the interviews, participants shared that they felt lonely and/or bored, and a supportive organization might at least help spouses connect with one another and find support from others who are going through a similar transition and experience. Second, we recommend that institutions give international students' spouses access to various services on campus like the career center or volunteer programs. This would give spouses the opportunity to get individualized guidance on how to continue advancing their career goals via volunteering or other means. Third, we recommend that university food pantries include food common in countries that send large numbers of students to the United States. Multiple participants shared that they used the food pantry, but that they wished there was food that they liked or were familiar with. Finally, we recommend institutions develop a newsletter that could go out to international students' spouses that would contain events and opportunities on campus. On college campuses and in surrounding communities, there are typically events and resources that are open to the public, and a newsletter would help international students' spouses to stay up to date on different opportunities that are open to them, but that they otherwise might not know about.

Recommendations for theory and future research

The expatriate spousal adjustment theory was originally developed to explain what factors contributed to "successful" and "unsuccessful" adjustments to living in a host country (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). The entire premise behind this theory is that spouses must ultimately adjust in order to support their spouse in their new career venture and to ensure that the placement is "successful" (e.g., the spouse finishes the work placement). Not only does this framing place blame on the spouse as an individualistic failing to adapt, ignoring societal structures (Peltonen, 2006), it also assumes that the primary role of the spouse is to adjust in order to support the partner. As seen in our results, all too often, the spouse that is being asked to sacrifice their career and adjust to a new living situation is the woman in the relationship. The sexist framing that it is the responsibility of the woman to sacrifice and adjust ignores the needs, aspirations, and agency of female international spouses.

With this in mind, we recommend that the theory should focus on the satisfaction and well-being of international student spouses instead of whether they adjusted to support their spouse succeeding professionally. Moreover, the expatriate spousal adjustment theory does not consider time as an important factor in understanding spousal adjustment. The time spent in a host country, time spent inside of community with other members, and time spent alone

may all contribute as to whether international student spouses “adjust.” Lastly, we contend that future use of the expatriate spousal adjustment theory should integrate intersectionality into the three dimensions because spouses’ adjustment is shaped not only by cultural and interpersonal experiences but also by intersecting systems of gender, immigration policy, race, class, and legal dependency. This integration would not only better capture the complexity of spouses’ lived experiences but also illuminate the structural inequalities that shape adjustment in ways that the current theory overlooks.

Beyond theoretical implications, we also have several areas of recommended future research. This study was conducted at one point in time; for this reason, we could obtain only a snapshot of the participants’ overall experiences. We recognize the temporal dimensions of lived experiences and know that participant perspectives may change over time, as is evident in narrative theory. Thus, we recommend that future research include a longitudinal study of how international students’ wives make sense of their transition to the United States as well as how their experiences may continue to evolve and change. A longitudinal study that follows international students’ wives throughout their years in the United States would provide additional insights that could contribute to implications for practice. An extended study would be particularly important at this moment in time as U.S. and global policies are continuously shifting and affecting international scholars and their families.

We also suggest engaging in a more critical gender-based analysis of international students’ wives. This current study provides an initial look at how women make sense of their transition, yet a critical gendered analysis (e.g., feminist theory) was beyond the scope of this exploratory study. Thus, we recommend that future research include the layers of gender through a more critical analysis. This would also include a research study on how international students’ husbands make sense of their gender roles as they transition into the United States.

Conclusion

We recognize that the context for this study is within the United States, and therefore, much like most qualitative inquiry, it is not expected nor desired to be generalizable. Yet the findings from this study may have applicability to a global audience, especially because students sojourn to institutions around the world. Thus, the contributions of this current study may provide insights for HEIs around the world to take into consideration the many challenges facing international students’ wives as well as their potential contributions to the global society.

Ultimately, this study highlights the multifaceted experiences of international students’ wives as they navigate their transition to life in a new country. By utilizing Shaffer and Harrison’s (2001) expatriate spousal adjustment theory, we revealed the significant challenges they face, particularly due to the restrictions imposed by F-2 visas. The findings underscore the importance of community and goal setting in mitigating feelings of isolation and loneliness, as many wives find validation and support in the connections they build with others, particularly other international students’ wives. Most importantly, the unique and distinct voices of international students’ wives provide insights into this understudied population on college campuses, which is a significant contribution to global scholarship.

Our recommendations for policy and practice advocate for systemic changes that would allow international students' spouses to maintain their personal agency, such as lifting visa work restrictions and enhancing campus support services across all HEIs. By including spouses in programming and support efforts, HEIs can play a pivotal role in facilitating their adjustment and overall well-being. Ultimately, this study calls for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by international students' spouses and emphasizes the need for ongoing support, advocacy, and inclusive policies that acknowledge and support their contributions and experiences within the academic and local communities.

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