

Migration of IT Specialists and Gender

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to analyze “after the shift,” which occurred in the second half of the 20th century, from a goods-producing society to an information or knowledge society, as information technology (IT) began to be seen as a most important asset of contemporary nations. Bell argued in 1973 that in the new social order, knowledge and information would replace industrial production, and would become the “axial principle” of social organization (Bell, 1973). By the end of the 20th century, IT has also become a truly global phenomenon, involved with the reconfiguration of the labor market and human and material resources from all over the world. Gary Becker, the 1992 Nobel laureate in economics, pointed out that the United States’ (U.S.) Silicon Valley currently employs 1 million people, of whom 40% have at least a bachelor’s degree and more than one-third are foreign-born.

In the new information economy, special importance is assigned to IT researchers and developers, who belong to the global group of “knowledge workers.” In the post-industrial era, IT workers have skills that allow them to compete in the global labor market, as IT jobs, by their very nature, are not tied to any particular culture and “can work” anywhere. At the same time, IT production is labor-intensive, and many first-world nations (Britain, Germany, France, Ireland, the U.S.), which have undergone a reduction in birthrates, feel that their own human resources are not sufficient for its development. In 2000, the American Institute for Electric and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) recognized that “With declining numbers from national engineering graduate programs, the U.S. has no option but to satisfy the growing need for the engineering professionals from abroad” (Institute, 1999). To bring professionals into the country, the U.S., the biggest IT developer, introduced an employer-based H1-B visa program for specialty occupations (e.g., computer professionals, programmers or engineers).

BACKGROUND

In the U.S., visa petitions by IT specialists are approved for up to 3 years and may be extended to 6 years. During this period, the employee cannot change the employer, but (potentially) may get a permanent residence permit (i.e., a Green Card). The 1990 ceiling for admissions was set at 65,000 a year, and in 1997, “for the first time, the maximum limit was reached by the end of the year; in 1998 the ceiling was reached in May” (Immigration, 2003, p. 45), and employers complained of shortages. The 1999 limit of 115,000 was exceeded by 20,000, and in October 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the American Competitiveness in the 21 Century Act, increasing the annual limit to 195,000 for 2001, 2002 and 2003 (Immigration, 2003). Following that year, H1-B “cap” was set to return to 65,000 in fiscal year 2004, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services received enough H1-B petitions, issued by U.S. employers, to meet the congressionally mandated number on February 17, 2004 (USCIS, 2004).

According to various sources, India provides 33% to 47% of U.S. high-tech employees with H1-B visas. The next-biggest supplier of IT developers is China, with about 9%, with Japan, Taiwan, Great Britain, Canada and South Korea providing 2% to 3% each. In recent years, specialists from Eastern Europe, mainly from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, have also become a visible group. These nations are now becoming aware of the “brain drain” to the West (International, 2002; Ferro, 2004).

American society is experiencing profound effects from and is concerned with this type of migration. There is controversy over whether the system brings more benefits than losses (Saxenian, 2002) and how it may affect the most vulnerable, mainly older, U.S. IT workers, who may not be retrained but “substituted” by younger, educated foreign nationals (O’Lawrence, 2001). Responses to Senator Phil Gramm’s introduction of a bill to raise the number of temporary high-tech guest workers were published

in the IEEE newsletter, *The Institute*, in 1999 under the headline “Stop the Insanity of H-1B!” (Institute, 1999). The conflict in how to view the H1-B program is part of a much larger issue; in the era of mobile labor force, individual states stopped being basic units of capitalism, while the government can only protect their workers within the frameworks of national systems of social justice (Rorty, 1998).

CURRENT TRENDS

The employment-based relocation of IT specialists to the U.S. is a highly gendered phenomenon. Spouses (and children) are only allowed to follow relocating programmers as “dependents” on H4 visas, which do not include the right to work. Overtly gender-neutral, the system is based on the assumption that programmers are male, for their professional spatial mobility is more socially acceptable than women’s: Men are not supposed to follow women as nonworking “dependents,” and such cases are rare (Gapova, 2004). Thus, the H1-B system derives from the idea of a certain family pattern, reflecting and strengthening an underlying gendered division of labor. While IT workers (i.e., men) relocate as professionals, spouses (i.e., women) follow them as caretakers and providers of intimacy.

In the globalized world, the value of human intimacy and chains of care is high (Rotkirch, 2000; Parrenas, 2001). Sometimes the relocation prospect serves as a “catalyst” to move from partnership to legal marriage, which otherwise might not have taken place. Men, unhappy about being on their own in a strange country, are often doubtful about their value in the U.S. marriage market and how to find new partners there. When interviewed, most post-Soviet H1-B visa holders emphasize the value, in the foreign lands, of the intimacy and human bondage that women provide, and many stress the need of a loyal partner as an important precondition for their very successful professional functioning (Gapova, 2004).

Women’s consent to follow as “dependents” may be conditioned by several considerations, the following two being most important: (1) their own professional status and career opportunities at home; and (2) the age of children, of whom they take care

more than men do. Wives with a (professional or advanced) degree and realistic career options view relocation as not bringing them personal professional gains, and such couples tend to reject the idea. Most women, though, being in their late 20s or early 30s, are too young to have developed a real career, so it looks like “there’s nothing to sacrifice.” Also, the money that the family can make under the new arrangement is a factor. As IT jobs are better paid than those done by women (whose occupation tend to be more bound to teaching, culture, healthcare, etc.) back home, it is women’s jobs that are normally sacrificed “for family’s sake.” The leap from a dual career to a single earner family, conditioned by the H1-B system, is justified by a much bigger male wage (Gapova, 2004).

The individual social mobilities in such couples are “opposed” to each other. The man’s social wealth derived from his work status is rather high and his class mobility tends to be upward: He is a professional in a prestigious field and the breadwinner. The woman’s social mobility is contradictory, simultaneously being upward and downward. While the family’s general financial situation improves, women on H4 visas depend on the male wage and have certain financial stability only as family members. Their occupational difference is converted into status inequality. Gapova (2000) writes about the vulnerability of post-Soviet H4 visa holders. Assisi (2004) claims human rights violations among H1-B visa holders’ spouses, and Raj (2003, 2004) states that partners of South Asian women on dependent spousal visas may use immigration laws prohibiting them from working to limit their autonomy, or even resort to violence.

CONCLUSION

Global production of IT is involved with movement of skilled labor across space; namely, the physical migration of (mostly male) high-tech professionals to North America and Western Europe from post-socialist countries, India and China on specialty professional visas. A certain concept of gender roles underlies the seemingly neutral migration arrangement. The system is constructed to strengthen a certain family form, globally producing men as pro-

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