

7-4-2011

## Resilience of Gendered Spheres in Translational Migration: A Comparison of Two Cultures

Jose Luis Calderon

Charles Drew University of Medicine, [drcalderon@sbcglobal.net](mailto:drcalderon@sbcglobal.net)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Calderon, J. L. (2011). Resilience of Gendered Spheres in Translational Migration: A Comparison of Two Cultures. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4), 1207-1213. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1130>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).



## Resilience of Gendered Spheres in Translational Migration: A Comparison of Two Cultures

### Abstract

Sheba George's ethnographic study used participant-observation methods, purposive sampling, and an insider's transnational journey to examine changes in family and social roles that result when nurses from Kerala, India, immigrate to the United States ahead of their husbands. The author concludes that the economic and political gain immigration affords nurses does not translate into enhanced social status for their family in India nor for their husbands in the U.S. when they undergo a gender role transferal from primary breadwinner to homemaker whilst their wives pursue their nursing careers. In a key observation, the author emphasizes that this role transferal also caused shifts in gender structure within the U.S. Kerali community. The purpose of this paper is to offer a review of George's examination of resilience of patriarchal cultural mores and gender roles of Kerali "nurse husbands" in the U.S. and to cross-culturally compare their resilience to that of Puerto Rican men who were born and raised in Puerto Rico before migrating to the US mainland. This comparison is born of George's experience as a first-generation Kerali American and that of this reviewer as a first-generation Puerto Rican American.

### Keywords

Participant Observation, Cross-Cultural Comparison, Transnational Migration, Patriarchal Cultural Mores

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Acknowledgements

Dr. Calderón received support from the DREW/UCLA Project EXPORT, NCMHD, P20MD000182.

## **Resilience of Gendered Spheres in Transnational Migration: A Comparison of Two Cultures**

José Luis Calderón

Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science, Los Angeles, CA, USA

---

*Sheba George's ethnographic study used participant-observation methods, purposive sampling, and an insider's transnational journey to examine changes in family and social roles that result when nurses from Kerala, India, immigrate to the United States ahead of their husbands. The author concludes that the economic and political gain immigration affords nurses does not translate into enhanced social status for their family in India nor for their husbands in the U.S. when they undergo a gender role transferal from primary breadwinner to homemaker whilst their wives pursue their nursing careers. In a key observation, the author emphasizes that this role transferal also caused shifts in gender structure within the U.S. Kerali community. The purpose of this paper is to offer a review of George's examination of resilience of patriarchal cultural mores and gender roles of Kerali "nurse husbands" in the U.S. and to cross-culturally compare their resilience to that of Puerto Rican men who were born and raised in Puerto Rico before migrating to the US mainland. This comparison is born of George's experience as a first-generation Kerali American and that of this reviewer as a first-generation Puerto Rican American. Key Words: Participant Observation, Cross-Cultural Comparison, Transnational Migration, Patriarchal Cultural Mores*

---

Sheba George's (2005) introduction to her book, *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*, provides important background information; wherein she sets the stage for an understanding of the paucity of published reports on women population groups immigrating to the United States before their families. Not likely due to a lack of scholarly interest, this scarcity may be largely due to the fact that historically it has been unusual for women to immigrate to the U.S. first. Irish women were among the first women to immigrate to the U.S. without men; escaping the Irish potato famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and seeking job opportunities in the growing U.S. service sector of the time (Diner, 1983; Jackson, 1984). A more recent example is the immigration of Latinas in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that continues today; forced to seek job opportunities to escape poverty in their native countries and taking advantage of a growing demand for domestic workers (Repak, 1995). Importantly, George notes that within reported studies there is little information on gender role transference that may occur when women immigrate first; that is, there is little information about changes in the family and social roles of women and men and how these changes may affect their way of life at home, at work, and within their communities.

To fill this gap in our knowledge, George (2005) examined changes in family and social roles that resulted when nurses from Kerala, India, immigrated to the U.S. ahead of their husbands and/or families. She aptly employed R. W. Connel's (1987) theoretical concept of gendered regimes as a framework for examining gender structures in the

context of the transnational migration of Kerali women. She also elaborates on the relationship between these gendered regimes or “gendered spheres as I call them” (p. 24) that may be in harmony or in conflict with each other in three domains: work, home and community.

*When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration* is a very engaging, readable and important book that is derived from George’s Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley and fueled by her personal experience as the daughter of an immigrant nurse from Kerala. Her focus on gender role transference in transnational migration adds a needed chapter that enhances our understanding of, for example, the impact on husbands and children when women immigrate before them. It should be noted that Kerala is a highly literate region of southern India where Dr. George was born. Central to her observations and discussion of gender role transference and class status is the use of a transnational lens in the context of the Keralite Syrian Christian Church, the most important social institution in the Keralite communities in India and the U.S.

George’s (2005) study takes the reader on an insider’s journey through the home, work and community spheres of gender role transference and examines its influence on class status in Kerala and Central City—a fictitious city based on an actual Keralite community into which Keralite nurses and their families settled after immigrating to California. George used purposive recruitment and participant observation to implement this ethnographic study and successfully gained the trust of the Keralite community’s families by way of her cultural ties to the Keralite Syrian Christian Church in California. An important strength of George’s study was her historical connection to, empathy with and immersion into the Keralite community in Kerala, India; a community she had not lived in since she was a child. Importantly, this was made possible by her perspicaciously leveraging introductions from families she interviewed in the U.S. Moreover, central to her discussion and conclusions about the resilience of Keralite patriarchal cultural mores is the role of the Keralite Syrian Christian Church in the lives of Keralite men in the US.

George shares the following observations about gender spheres that result first when Kerali women immigrate first.

### Home

- Kerali women became the primary breadwinners. Since they were separated from families at times for years, they developed a level of independence not afforded to them in India since in effect they now held the purse strings.
- Kerali men married to nurses were no longer the primary breadwinners in Kerala and the U.S. They experienced gender role transferal to that of homemaker including child rearing and cooking. This transferal resulted in *emasculatation*.

George (2005) frequently uses the term *emasculatation* in context of using the term *nurse husbands* referred to below. That is, gender transferal may have resulted in Kerali men self-perceiving and to be perceived as having been emasculated or “deprived of

strength, vigor or spirit” (Webster, 2011). The association between these terms leaves a powerful visual impression of castration; the taking away what physically and psychologically defines and distinguishes a man from a woman.

### **Work**

- In Kerala, India, nursing was considered a low-level job and, given cultural mores prohibitive of women touching others, Indian nurses were referred to as “dirty nurses.” Their job to provide nursing care to both female and male patients that requires touching, notwithstanding. This unveils a double standard since nursing care may inevitable be required by most persons at some point in their lives.
- In the U.S. nursing is considered a profession, pays relatively well and carries a favorable social status. George explains that Keralite RNs when possible would avoid doing “dirty” work such as bathing patients and removing bedpans. It would seem that they too held on to cultural beliefs and perceptions that these chores were “dirty.” This may be indicative of limitations in resilience among Kerali nurses in the workplace.
- Kerala is a literate region of India meaning that Kerali men had many marketable skills. Unfortunately they were not recognized by the US workforce. Consequently, many of them held jobs for which they were over qualified; likely contributing to their perceived sense of emasculation such that opting for homemaking made more sense despite the gender transferal and community perception associated with it.

### **Community**

- Despite Kerali women being more upwardly mobile as healthcare professionals in the U.S. their label as “dirty nurses” in the Kerali community was projected onto their husbands who were known as “nurse husbands”; “nurse” first then “husband.” The nurse was the breadwinner and their husbands were Kerali men who were dependent on their wives. Thus by Kerali standards woman in nursing with husbands who stay at home with their children are the head of household. It should be noted that this does not differ appreciably from the definition of head of household in the U.S.
- The role of Kerali nurses in church affairs diminished in the U.S. Perhaps because of time conflicts and the demands of nursing. Serendipitously, the resulting vacuum in church leadership was filled by Kerali men whose role in and responsibilities for church affairs became dominant. Kerali nurses may be said to have demonstrated resilience by relinquishing this domain of power that traditionally is the domain of women in Kerala, India.
- Taking a dominant role in the church helped “de-emascuate” Kerali men given the importance of religiosity in day to day Kerali family and

community life. Such a concession to male dominance may be viewed as assuaging Kerali “machismo.”

Despite the resiliency exhibited by Kerali women and men when the former immigrated first, a lack of resiliency in the Kerali community is evident by both Kerali nurses and their husbands being given derogatory labels. Kerali nurses were considered “dirty nurses” and Kerali men were referred to as “nurse husbands”. The former because Kerali culture perceives nurses as doing a “dirty job”, despite being engaged in what is considered a medical profession in the U.S.; the latter because Kerali men historically did not do a woman’s work. Kerali men married to nurses were referred to as “nurse husbands” and thereby stripped of their *machismo*, that is emasculated, if they were homemakers. These derogatory terms have historical basis in Indian culture wherein it is believed that a person, especially women, should not touch unrelated persons and men are to be the de facto head of household and not homemakers.

It occurred to this reviewer that applying the concept of *emasculatation* to describe the consequences of role transferal contrasts with the concept of *machismo*. Kerali men were resilient in bearing the burden of being stripped of this cultural characteristic of men by becoming homemakers and being dependents of their wives. In contrast immigrant Puerto Rican men were not resilient to role transferal in the context of Latino culture. Gender role transferal was a concept that was *non sequetor*. While reading Georges (2005) account, this author frequently found himself making comparisons between her Kerali immigrant parents and his Puerto Rican immigrant parents; her professional mother and his homemaker mother; her nurturing father and his domineering and abusive father; her overqualified father and his under skilled father; her tight-knit middle class community and his inner-city ghetto he grew up childhood. That Georges (2005) narrative invoked these comparisons is perceived by this reviewer as a testimony to the power of this ethnographic study.

Whereas Kerali men found a common ground with their wives and found their patriarchal cultural norms and *machismo* preserved through male dominance in the church, Puerto Rican men (from the perspective of this author’s experience) had little to do with the church. A role perceived as a women’s domain. It should be noted that the Keralite Syrian Christian Church is Protestant whereas most Puerto Ricans are Catholic. However, differences in Christian philosophy among these two branches of Christianity (the third being the Orthodox Christian Church) and their potential role in Kerali and Puerto Rican male perceptions is beyond the scope of this review. Suffice to say that there seems to be a correlation between church involvement and the acceptance of family and social roles of Kerali men and the lack of church involvement and the perpetuation of patriarchal chauvinistic attitudes among immigrant Puerto Rican men.

It is notable that since 1919 Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens at birth and they are technically migrants to mainland U.S. However, because of cultural and language differences with mainland Americans, they were treated as immigrants and for the purposes of discussion the author refers to them as such. Table 1 (see next page) offers a subjective comparison of gendered spheres and related issues germane to Kerali and Puerto Rican men who immigrated to the U.S. using the constructs of home, work and community espoused by George (2005). Despite the male condition and the need for displaying dominance, Kerali and Puerto women were willing to work to support their

families. Kerali nurses did in large part due to their husband's resilience. Puerto Rican women for the most part did support the household given their husbands dogmatic stance in *machismo*.

Table 1. *Gender spheres and social realities of Kerali and Puerto Rican immigrant men*

HOME		WORK		COMMUNITY	
Kerali	Puerto Rican	Kerali	Puerto Rican	Kerali	Puerto Rican
Gender transferal	No gender transferal	Skilled; overqualified	Unskilled	Church affiliation	Little Church affiliation
Resilience to gender transferal	Resistance to gender transferal	Usually under employed	Usually Unemployed	Church center of social activity	Social clubs & bodegas center of activities
Helped raise children	Rarely helped raise children	Frequently the Homemaker	Rarely the Homemaker	Contributed to social services	Depended on social services
Kerali and English spoken	Spanish spoken preferentially			Naturalized Citizens	US Citizens
Paucity of domestic violence	High incidence of domestic violence			<i>Close transnational ties</i>	<i>Close transnational ties</i>
Owned homes in middle class community	Rented apartments in low income communities			Immigrated after wife	Immigrated before or with wife

### Conclusion

The importance of the differences in resilience in transnational migration between Kerali men, who were accepting and looked toward the church to re-masculate, and Puerto Rican men, who remained indifferent and espoused machismo, cannot be overstated. The former demonstrated resilience for the sake of family and community whereas the latter were not resilient, refusing to accept transgender roles regardless of the consequences to family and community. The former facilitated enhanced socio-economic status for their family and community and the latter accepted unemployment and social services even though in many cases their wives may have been able to work, since this would be perceived as relinquishing the role of head of household and hence manhood.

Another important footnote is the striking difference between first-generation Puerto Rican men in the U.S. as a group, and their immigrant fathers. As a group, first generation Puerto Rican men were more likely to be nurturing toward their children than their immigrant fathers. First generation men were also more likely to have a working spouse when their children were of school age. As a first generation Puerto Rican in this reviewer empathizes with the Keralite men since as a single father of four he was the quintessential "Mr. Mom." Unlike his immigrant predecessor he did not perceive himself

to be emasculated or humiliated from role reversal in the home. On the contrary, his perception was one of being emasculated if he did not fulfill his family role in caring for his children as well as his social role as breadwinner. Though unique, the author's experience is not an outlying one since, in his experience, it was common for married second and third generation Puerto Rican men to share child rearing responsibilities with working wives. As such they have morphed over time and have taken on characteristics of Kerali "nurse husbands" without the applied stigma.

The time to achieving resilience of gendered spheres for the two groups of men is also of note. Kerali men were resilient as first-generation immigrants. This was facilitated by their involvement in the church. Puerto Rican men required from two to three generations to achieve some measure of reliance of gendered spheres. The latter brings to bear the importance of acculturation, education and language concordance in fostering resilience of gendered spheres in the home, work and community among immigrants in general. That fact that first generation Kerali men were English-speaking and highly educated and first generation Puerto Rican men were primarily Spanish-speaking and under educated which supports this notion.

Moreover, today's economic climate may be an equalizer of gendered spheres between men and women since employment challenges have, out of necessity, made two working parent homes more commonplace. Consequently, there may be greater acceptance of role reversal in the context of homemaking and child rearing within any given sub-culture though previously frowned upon, since within mainstream American culture role reversal at home is becoming status quo. This notwithstanding, ongoing and growing immigration to the U.S. gives Georges (2005) study future importance, particularly when considering the immigration of peoples whose cultures differ radically from most in the context of gendered spheres. For example, families from Central Asian cultures where women may not be heard and Asian culture where the girl child is considered a burden. In both cases resilience is unlikely and role transferal may take many generations in the U.S. if ever. This has implications for the socio-economic status and health outcomes for these immigrant cultures.

George's (2005) work is a worthy read and provides fertile ground for the harvesting of new research questions about the resilience of patriarchal cultural mores among men who immigrate in the context of their spouses immigrating first. What George does not discuss is the role of spirituality and prayer in the home and community as defined by the protestant Keralite Syrian Church. From the perspective of this author it may have played an important role in the trust imparted by husbands to women who immigrated first and their gender role transferal. Nevertheless, Dr. George has provided important food for thought and a framework for studying gender transferal and resilience of gendered spheres among other immigrant cultures whether or not women migrated first. As such, Dr. Georges work has made an important contribution to the literature on transnational migration.

## References

- Connel, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



- Diner, H. R. (1983). *Erin's daughters in America: Irish immigrant women in the nineteenth century*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- George, S. M. (2005) *When women come first: Gender and class in transnational migration*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Repak, T. A. (1995). *Waiting on Washington: Central American workers in the nation's capital*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Meriam Webster Dictionary. (2011). Emasculation: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emasculation?show=0&t=1303571590> Accessed April 23, 2011
- 

### Author Note

José Luis Calderón, MD is Associate Professor with the Medical Sciences Institute, the Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science, Los Angeles, CA., where he conducts qualitative ethnomedical studies among African Americans and immigrant Latinos. Please make inquiries by email to: [drcalderon@sbcglobal.net](mailto:drcalderon@sbcglobal.net)

Dr. Calderón received support from the DREW/UCLA Project EXPORT, NCMHD, P20MD000182.

Copyright 2011: José Luis Calderón and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

- Calderón, J. L. (2011). Resilience of gendered spheres in transnational migration: A comparison of two cultures. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4), 1153-1159.  
Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-4/calderon.pdf>