



## Article

# Negotiating and Voicing: A Study of Employment Experiences among Vietnamese Marriage Immigrant Women in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** Applying a sociocultural approach and poststructural feminist theories as its framework, this study analyzed interviews with nine Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in Taiwan to explore their employment experiences in the process of crossing national and cultural boundaries. These low-skilled women labored to accumulate essential capital and struggled to be workers in demand. They accepted the improved employment quality that was affected by gendered racialization. Stable employment empowered these women, and some even divorced to achieve personal autonomy. The results of this study suggest that employment was significant for the daily lives of these immigrant women. Obviously, their prior socialization in Vietnam and the life experiences and economic structure in Taiwan interacted to contribute to these women's work experiences, and they continually developed agency and a voice to create their positions and life meanings by participating in the Taiwanese labor market. This study recommends further investigation of marriage immigrant women's identities and voices in the workplace and their expression of sexuality and femininity in employment.

**Keywords:** immigrant women; employment experiences; sociocultural approach; poststructural feminist theories; marriage migration; sustainable agency



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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, transnational marriage migration has accounted for a significant portion of female migration in East Asia. Socioeconomically disadvantaged men in rich eastern Asia, such as Taiwan and Japan, tend to seek overseas spouses, whereas women in underdeveloped countries, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, usually migrate in search of prosperity (Bélanger et al. 2005). Since the 1990s, immigrant women arriving in Taiwan from southeastern Asia through commercially arranged marriages<sup>1</sup> have represented a growing group that now reaches 2.4% of the Taiwanese population. Over 113,000 Vietnamese women married Taiwanese males before 2022 (Ministry of the Interior 2022a) and these women constitute an important part of the marriage migration flows in East Asia (Tang and Wang 2011). Due to the traditional patriarchy, these women are expected to give birth to offspring and to be subservient housewives. However, these immigrant women wish to support the financial households of their natal family in Vietnam through participation in the labor market. Based on racial superiority and class discrimination, the Taiwanese media usually portray Vietnamese immigrant women as “runaway brides” who divorce their Taiwanese husbands when they obtain Taiwanese identification and earn enough money. Additionally, these women are viewed as troublemakers because of their lack of Chinese literacy, appropriate education and social integration, resulting in parenting problems (Wu 2014). Therefore, these women comprise a new vulnerable population in Taiwan due to the complicated challenges arising from commercially arranged marriages and immigration, which are intertwined with issues of gender, class, and ethnicity (Bélanger et al. 2005; Lan 2019).

The employment of immigrants not only solves the problem of labor shortages and promotes economic development in the receiving countries but also contributes to the

economies of the sending countries via remittances of income back home (Wu 2022). Although labor market participation in the receiving countries facilitates the economic welfare and social integration of immigrant women, structural and cultural discrimination, a lack of labor market skills, and heavy economic burdens put female immigrants in a disadvantaged position (Ghosh 2000). Immigrant women face higher unemployment risks and tend to have nonstandard work, with temporary, part-time, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs in the marginalized area of the capitalized labor market, one part of the patriarchal system. Even highly professional immigrant women are usually deskilled to the point where their jobs do not match their professionalism. In sum, immigrant women have historically been undervalued laborers with poor employment quality (Jandl et al. 2003; Man 2004).

Despite the increasing scholarship on the employment of immigrant women, most research has focused on the occupational experiences of skilled Asian and African immigrant women in the U.S., Canada or Western Europe, whereas other female immigrants who are typically viewed as unskilled have received little scholarly attention (Man 2004; Purkayastha 2005).

Although a few studies have explored the occupational experiences of low-skilled immigrant women, most of these works highlight the human capital deficiencies of these women rather than their human capital potential (Ollivier et al. 2018). Contemporary research has uncovered the decontextualized employment challenges of immigrant women in North America or Western Europe who migrate under family reunification clauses or who migrate solely as workers. However, little research has specifically explored the contextualized work experiences of Asian women who enter other Asian nations as commercially arranged marriage immigrants. This neglect may result from the fact that in their host countries, female marriage immigrants are usually viewed as wives and mothers and not as potential laborers because of institutionalized, racist, and sexist discrimination (Tang and Wang 2011).

To protect its female citizens, Vietnam has regulations on international marriage that are stipulated in the Marriage and Family Code; furthermore, the Vietnamese government has designated one of its women's associations to handle international marriages (Song 2015). To facilitate the social integration of marriage immigrant women in Taiwan, in 2003, the government implemented "Care Service Measures for Immigrants", which emphasize eight major objectives, including life adaptation, medical and reproductive health care, protection of employment rights, improvement of education and culture, assistance in child rearing, protection of personal safety, and promotion of the legal system. These tasks are handled by relevant agencies. In addition, the government has improved marriage immigrant women's employment by modifying the labor regulations and offering sponsored vocational training and certain preferential measures to encourage companies to hire female immigrant workers (Lan 2019). According to the labor regulations, immigrant women who marry Taiwanese nationals and then obtain residence permits can work without applying for a work permit. However, some employers refuse to provide legal work opportunities for marriage immigrant women without a Taiwanese identity. Therefore, a small number of marriage immigrant women must engage in the illegal labor market with low pay and remain in an insecure employment environment (Wu 2022). Marriage immigrant women usually obtain a junior high school education in their sending countries, which is much lower than the education that native women obtain (Ministry of the Interior 2022b). In 2019, the labor force participation rate of marriage immigrant women rose to 69.9%, much higher than that of their native counterparts (51.1%), while the average income of working marriage immigrant women was just 51.8% of that of native women in 2018 (Ministry of the Labor 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, marriage immigrant women were overrepresented in unskilled and labor-intensive occupations, with 38.4% working as service and sales staff and 29.8% working as elementary laborers, while 32.2% worked in the manufacturing industry and 24.1% in the accommodation and catering industry, thereby contributing to the Taiwanese economy. However, approximately 70% of employed marriage immigrant

women obtained standard full-time employment, 71.9% reported no employment problems, and 89.6% were satisfied with their employment (Ministry of the Interior 2022b). This experience is significantly different from the employment experiences of immigrant women workers in Europe and North America (Man 2004; Purkayastha 2005).

Employment is a highly sociocultural phenomenon, and a variety of social and cultural factors combine to affect individuals' occupational experiences (Read and Cohen 2007). When Vietnamese marriage immigrant women participate in the Taiwanese labor market, they must negotiate their initial socialization in the Taiwanese sociocultural contexts. Due to their complex position in terms of gender, class, and migration, these women are potentially vulnerable in the labor market (Read and Cohen 2007). To ensure comprehensive knowledge of the contemporary occupational experiences of marriage immigrant women in Taiwan, it is advisable to adopt a dynamic approach through a feminist perspective that thoroughly examines the interaction between female immigrant laborers and their complex contexts within the host and original countries. Based on a sociocultural approach and poststructural feminist theories, this study aims to investigate the employment experiences of Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in Taiwan in their process of crossing national and cultural boundaries by focusing on the influence of their contexts and the development of their agency and voices. Answers are sought for the following questions: Why do Vietnamese marriage immigrant women work in Taiwan? How do female Vietnamese marriage immigrants work in the Taiwanese labor market? How does participation in the Taiwanese labor market affect female Vietnamese marriage immigrants?

This study has a specific academic impact. First, it highlights Vietnamese female marriage immigrant laborers, a largely uninvestigated population. Second, it examines Asia–Asia female migration, an important but relatively unknown part of international migration flows, to uncover a new context in which immigrant women work. Third, it explores this issue by emphasizing the interaction of sociocultural approaches and feminist theories.

This study does not intend to generalize the results to all marriage immigrant women in Taiwan. Immigrant women of different cultural and social backgrounds may have different responses to employment in Taiwan. Although the employment experiences of a small number of Vietnamese marriage immigrant women cannot be generalized to all marriage immigrant women, some of the sociocultural contexts in employment that these Vietnamese marriage immigrant women encounter may be common to all female marriage immigrants (Tang and Wang 2011).

## 2. The Study Framework

This study utilizes a sociocultural approach and poststructural feminist theories as its framework to examine the employment experiences of Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in Taiwan.

### 2.1. A Sociocultural Approach

Sociocultural theories originated from Vygotskian learning studies and emphasize conceptualizing individuals' learning. These theories have been extended to explore various aspects of individuals' lives, such as work and agency (Lasky 2005). The sociocultural approach, which connects individual and contextual perspectives, suggests that individuals' beliefs and behaviors interact with and are shaped not only by what happens between individuals in interactions but also by the cultural, physical, historical, institutional, and social elements in which their interactions are embedded and mediated by symbolic systems. The interaction among and mutual embeddedness of these elements are vital to individuals' values and actions (Rogoff 1995; Wertsch and Rupert 1993).

According to the sociocultural approach, there is a social aspect of employment in the sense that interactions with others can affect the work of individuals. This aspect extends the concept of employment to include interactions in a community of workers. The sociocultural approach to employment also considers personal factors, such as gender,

class and early socialization, that affect how individuals work and what they do (Rogoff 1995). Accordingly, this approach to employment assumes that all labor market participants who are members of various defined cultures bring numerous sociocultural beliefs to their occupational environments. Therefore, in employment, people build up their work experiences based on what they know within working contexts, and all of the experiences and tools that they apply are integrated into their employment (Alfred 2003; Lattuca 2002). Hence, the sociocultural approach lays the multidimensional analytical groundwork for a dialectical model of employment in which individuals and contexts interact in critical ways and are mutually constitutive (Koopmans 2016).

## 2.2. Poststructural Feminism Theories

Poststructuralist feminism focuses on understanding how knowledge, difference, subjectivity, and discourse intersect to shape the life experiences of women and create possibilities for change (Gannon and Davies 2007).

This approach also focuses on the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and privilege and how an individual woman responds to her unique experiences of oppression, particularly her active agency in resisting oppressive forces and shaping her life. Positionality and voice are considered means of constructing reality, highlighting the fact that women's identities are continually in flux (Tisdell 1998). The agency that poststructural feminism opens up is a recognition of the power to change and a fascination with the capacity to generate new life forms (Weedon 1987).

Based on a sociocultural approach, a poststructural feminist framework and the intersection of the two, the present study examines the employment experiences of female Vietnamese immigrants in Taiwan by connecting their personal occupational experiences with sociocultural contexts and by concentrating on their position and voice.

## 3. Methodology

In this research, female marriage immigrants from Vietnam were the subjects of inquiry. Based on the daily experiences of these women, their narratives were connected with the sociocultural contexts in which their employment experiences were embedded.

### 3.1. Participants

The participants in the research were nine female Vietnamese immigrants who entered Taiwan through commercially arranged marriages with Taiwanese men. At the time of the study, each participant had been employed in her current job for at least 1 year and had a minimum of 7 years of Taiwanese work experience. Thus, these immigrants had a certain level of stable employment experience upon which they could reflect. The women were invited to participate in the study by social workers at female immigrant settlement agencies using a snowball method.

Table 1 outlines the backgrounds of the participants, whose names are pseudonyms. The average age of the participants was 37.7 years. The women reported that they arrived in Taiwan mainly to improve their life and the lives of their families. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees had lived in Taiwan for an average of 14.4 years, and their average job tenure in Taiwan was 12.8 years. Before migrating to Taiwan, they had rich work experiences outside the home, except for two participants who assisted with their family's work. Seven had Vietnamese junior high school diplomas, and all had received vocational training in Taiwan and subsequently obtained professional certificates by passing professional examinations. All but one had at least one child, and four were divorced (Alice, Bess, Cara, and Erin). They all had full-time jobs, and three were self-employed. They worked as owners, workers, and attendants in the catering, personal service, beauty, and production industries.

**Table 1.** The backgrounds of the participants.

<b>Name (Age)</b>	<b>Years in Taiwan/Years of Employment in Taiwan</b>	<b>Education in Vietnam</b>	<b>Employment in Vietnam</b>	<b>Vocational Training in Taiwan</b>	<b>Current Employment Position</b>
Alice (32)	8/7	Junior high school	Accounting personnel in a factory	Beauty, manicure, massage	Masseuse and beautician at a spa
Bess (38)	13/12	Primary school	Owner of a dress shop and a cafe	Taiwanese cooking	Leader of CNC lathe operators at a factory
Cara (29)	8/7	Senior high school (Year 1)	Owner of a beauty salon	Taiwanese cooking, beauty, manicure	Owner of and manicurist at a nail salon
Dawn (37)	16/15	Undergraduate (Year 2)	No employment	Insurance broker, Taiwanese cooking, resident care	Resident care attendant
Erin (36)	18/17	Junior high school	Owner of a fruit stand, apprentice at a beauty salon	Beauty, manicure	Owner of and manicurist at a nail salon
Fay (46)	15/14	Senior high school	Owner of a Vietnamese dress shop, assistant at a Vietnamese eatery	Taiwanese cooking	Owner of and cook at a Vietnamese eatery, maker and seller of Vietnamese dresses
Gail (38)	16/14	Junior high school (Year 2)	No employment	Beauty, Taiwanese cooking, baking	Leader of attendants at a restaurant
Hulda (43)	20/15	Junior high school	Worker in a factory	Taiwanese cooking, court interpreting	Government volunteer, Vietnamese–Chinese court interpreter
Ida (40)	18/15	Senior high school	Assistant to managers in Taiwanese factories	Taiwanese cooking, court interpreting	Director of a catering service, Vietnamese–Chinese court interpreter

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through life history interviews, which offered the participants abundant opportunity to recollect their experiences in the personal and sociocultural contexts of employment in Taiwan. The participants were encouraged to narratively share their employment experiences and to contemplate the following topics: their life and work experiences before immigration; the events motivating their migration to Taiwan and their early adaptation in Taiwan; their employment in Taiwan; and their reflections on their personal development. The structure of the data gathering process was uniform to permit a comparative analysis of the data. Each of the informants was interviewed twice. The first interviews usually lasted between two and three hours, and the second interviews, which addressed any deficiencies in the initial data, lasted approximately 30 min. Follow-up telephone discussions were conducted for clarification. All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese.

Within- and cross-case analyses were used to analyze the interview transcripts (Patton 2014). First, the researcher and the assistant separately coded each participant's interview as a single case. Second, they discussed the coding and extracted emerging categories and properties based on the interview topics. Third, constant comparative analysis was used to construct the cross-case analysis to validate the patterns that emerged from the within-case analysis and to identify common patterns across cases (Wu 2014). Then, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the participants examined the summary of the findings and confirmed the appropriateness of the interpretation (Carlson 2010).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Laboring as Economic, Cultural, and Human Capital

The participants embraced multiple values of employment and were eager to work in Taiwan to build up economic, cultural, and human capital to fulfil their expected responsibilities and demonstrate their personal values.

In Vietnam, women and men both have to take jobs to support the families' finances regardless of whether they are married. Additionally, these participants also found that it was common for other Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan to take jobs. The sociocultural expectations and culture of the reference group motivated these women in the early stage of adaptation to seek jobs to continue their work careers. "Therefore, despite being pregnant, in Taiwan I liked working as I had worked in Vietnam. Working to help the family finances has been my life's responsibility," Fay noted. Therefore, these participants' employment in Taiwan serves as a continuation of the cultural pattern of their homeland—the responsibility for their family (Lim 1997).

Most of the women yearned to enter the Taiwanese labor market mainly because of the poor financial situation of their immediate family in Taiwan. Since the women married their Taiwanese husbands through marriage brokers, they were not acquainted with their husbands' background until they arrived in Taiwan. Most of their husbands could not afford the household expenses due to their unemployment and refusal to support the family financially.

Although these women were shocked and disappointed by the real financial situation of their husbands because they married Taiwanese men mainly to pursue a better life, they could not help but face reality and sought jobs as soon as possible "to pay the household expenses of my Taiwanese family rather than remitting money back to my parents," Cara said.

Some of the women were also forced to seek better employment much more urgently when they divorced and had to support the family as a single mother. For example, Cara said, "I never thought I would have a broken marriage. However, when I became a single immigrant parent, I couldn't waste time regretting my international marriage but had to seek better-paid jobs to continue my life in Taiwan".

All of the participants highlighted the instrumental value of obtaining employment outside the home in both Vietnamese and Taiwanese cultures, which have traditionally

viewed working outside the home as the key to proving personal contributions to the family and society. "In Vietnam, those who work outside usually earn more respect than those who help their family work at home because working outside means one is useful and capable," Ida emphasized. "The Taiwanese also emphasize the surface value of procuring employment and always judge someone by their jobs . . . . This is particularly true for commercially arranged marriage immigrant women from southeastern Asia," Hulda felt.

Additionally, since these women usually faced Taiwanese discrimination due to their status as commercially arranged marriage immigrants, they felt the need to prove their multiple abilities and true care for their Taiwanese family to fight Taiwanese discrimination by making money to support the immediate family through employment. Erin noted, "Some Taiwanese ridicule us because our immigrant women love to make money for their natal families. Actually, I came to Taiwan for a better life, but I also truly loved my Taiwanese family. Moreover, I also understood if I had just stayed home, I could have been viewed as a useless woman".

#### 4.2. *Struggling to Be Desirable Taiwanese Laborers*

To participate in the Taiwanese labor market, the participants struggled with their husbands' conflicting attitudes toward their employment outside the home. Meanwhile, their fearless efforts and their Vietnamese sisters' referrals contributed to them obtaining employment, and attending vocational training made them desirable Taiwanese laborers.

Upon arriving in Taiwan, these women were eager to enter the labor market. Nevertheless, their husbands held conflicted attitudes toward their wives' work outside the home, which shocked and frustrated these women. On the one hand, their husbands tended to limit these women's social networks lest they learn something bad and betray the family due to Taiwanese patriarchal traditions. On the other hand, their husbands wanted them to contribute to their poor family finances by obtaining employment. Therefore, at first, their husbands were ambivalent about their immigrant wives' working outside the home and frequently meddled with their job searches, providing little support.

As Gail noted, "Initially, my husband rejected working as a barber lest I would contact men . . . he also stopped me from working in the beauty salon because he thought I would wear such heavy makeup that I would be so sexy. However, I insisted on obtaining paid work . . . Finally, he reluctantly approved of my working in the catering shop since he felt being a cook or catering servant might be rather simple". Similarly, Cara stated that "my ex-husband originally wanted me not to be a manicurist because he believed it was dirty to file others' nails. However, because I decided to work at this job, he compromised but asked me not to serve male customers". Therefore, their insistence persuaded their husbands to reluctantly yield to their working outside the home. Obviously, these Taiwanese husbands would like to control their immigrant wives' sexuality and femininity biologically, culturally and symbolically (Lan 2008) by affecting their wives' employment choices as a symbolic demonstration of their power and offering them a psychological sense of safety and self-confidence (Espin 2013). However, it also reflected these men's worries arising from gendered racism (Essed 1994) and media reports that divorced Vietnamese immigrant women's prostitution is increasing in Taiwan (Chang 2008).

These women sought jobs through limited personal resources with little support from their Taiwanese families. Unlike the immigrant women in Canada and America, who seek jobs by using many employment services from the government (Premji et al. 2014), most of the participants lacked sufficient Chinese literacy, education and knowledge of the Taiwanese society to be confident in seeking employment by themselves, including applying to jobs in person, reading hiring advertisements in newspapers and on the internet, and calling for interviews directly. The availability of more work opportunities in Taiwan and their rich employment experiences in Vietnam encouraged them to realistically aspire to jobs matching their background instead of so-called decent employment. As Ida said, "I wasn't afraid to seek jobs in Taiwan. I could find jobs myself or ask for my Vietnamese friends' help. Most importantly, I was willing to do any jobs in Taiwan". These women's

fearless attitudes toward searching for employment in Taiwan demonstrated their agency and eager pursuit of a prosperous life in Taiwan, which echoes the immigration theory that the immigration process is a form of self-selection and that immigrants are ambitious and willing to take risks (Nazareno et al. 2019).

For these women, referrals from Vietnamese sisters in Taiwan instead of their Taiwanese family were a powerful job search strategy. These Vietnamese women married Taiwanese men whose factories needed laborers or whose self-employed workload was heavy and enthusiastically recommended these women to their employers or clients. Additionally, “My employer at the factory thinks that we female immigrants work more diligently with more sense of responsibility, and he would like to hire the Vietnamese sisters we refer to him,” Bess said.

The participants sought to obtain the required credentials to secure higher-paid work by attending vocational training. Vocational training worked as cultural capital to compensate for their low education or poor Chinese literacy, to improve their self-confidence in employment, and to create employment opportunities. These government-funded training programs are offered especially to immigrant women and were originally intended to facilitate female immigrants’ employability and adjustment to Taiwanese workplace practices (Ministry of the Interior 2022b). As Fay said, “The Chinese cuisine training improved my skills of garnishing, food presentation and food cutting, which are different from those in other Vietnamese restaurants. After training, I attended many school bazaars to promote Vietnamese cuisine”. However, the vocational training for immigrant women also reproduced the dominant Taiwanese employment culture and assimilated the immigrant women to be submissive and productive workers.

Paradoxically, these participants appreciated the training delivered in the Taiwanese-centered way without integrating their original context since they sought to obtain Taiwanese training. These women believed that they benefited greatly by learning new cuisine and beauty hygiene skills via vocational training, despite complaining that the training instructors criticized the hygiene of their homeland and seemed to deprecate their original culture. According to Gail, “The immigrant women in the settlement agency enthusiastically called me to attend the programs. On the beauty and cooking training, it was kind of the instructors to remind us to learn Taiwanese practices, like courtesy and good sanitary habits, and reduce our bad eastern Asian hygiene to adjust to the Taiwanese workplace . . . . I didn’t want the training to emphasize our immigrants’ culture. I just wanted to learn the pure Taiwanese skills”.

With the exception of vocational training, most of these women seldom utilized government-funded employment services, although the Taiwanese government has proactively implemented multiple employment services to facilitate immigrant women’s employment. For these women, vocational training was the substantial, available, and concrete resource to obtain jobs “because the government would offer subsidy, free tuition and guidance on obtaining technological certificates for immigrant women trainees, which would contribute greatly to obtaining and improving our employment”, said Ida. Additionally, the training institutes proactively invited immigrant women to engage in training to achieve their performance objectives, which seemed to improve the accessibility vocational training to the immigrant women (Wu 2014).

#### *4.3. Employment Quality Affected by Gendered Racism*

Working as volunteers and working in the pornographic massage sector were alternative employment opportunities for these marriage immigrant women in Taiwan. In the workplaces, there were competitive relationships between these women and their female ethnic group members. For these women, their commercially arranged marriage immigration background was akin to a double-edged sword with conflicting effects on their employment. Despite being satisfied with the employment quality, juggling intensive work and family was still more than a double workday for them.



In Taiwan, due to the increasing number of immigrant women, certain alternative jobs for immigrant women have become prosperous, including government volunteers for immigrant women's settlement and work in the pornographic massage sector. Some participants had worked as part-time government-designated interpreters and volunteers specializing in immigrant women. In contrast to the extensive volunteer work that immigrant women in Canada perform to accumulate Canadian experience for formal jobs (Man 2004), Vietnamese immigrant women were encouraged by the Taiwanese government to support their ethnic group members, and most of these female immigrant volunteers were paid more than the legal minimum wage for their transportation. These efforts by the Taiwanese government to provide exclusive occupations for immigrant women not only enriches settlement services for immigrant women but also empowers them and facilitates their employment. However, the government's encouraging immigrant women to serve their ethnic group voluntarily without reward caused a backlash from immigrant women. "The government seems to shirk its responsibility of taking care of immigrant women by exploiting these immigrant women as volunteers," noted Hulda.

In recent years, Taiwan porn massage shops in which sexual services were offered began to flaunt their Vietnamese beauties' services. Vietnamese immigrant women are as famous for their good performance in the beauty industry in Taiwan as in other host country (Gold 2014). However, the beauty industry, such as body massage and hairdressing, is susceptible to links to pornography (Chang 2008). Having once worked in a pornographic spa, Alice said, "In such porn shops, there are different kinds of services, including pure massages and porn ones. My immigrant friend referred me only to offer pure massage. However, because my daughter stayed in the shops when I worked, I was afraid that she would be affected by the complicated environment and that I would be criticized by my friends and family in Vietnam. Thus, I quit the job. Actually, more and more divorced marriage immigrant women without Taiwanese ID do offer porn services to earn a living there". "As long as the neighbors know that I work as a masseuse, they usually pay strange attention to me as if I went to the porn spa for work," said Erin.

In the workplace, the participants usually worked with and served female members of their ethnic group, including other marriage immigrant women and migrant laborers. In the beginning, they thought that they would maintain close relationships with their ethnic sisters because they were from the same country. However, they tended to have competitive relationships with their ethnic sisters.

In the workplace, these participants felt they were viewed as competitors by their ethnic marriage immigrant coworkers, some of whom even referred them to the jobs. Their ethnic marriage immigrant coworkers were afraid that these women's better performance would influence their business performance; as a result, they were jealous of, spoke ill of, and competed with these participants. As a spa masseuse, Alice said, "I didn't understand my Vietnamese colleagues' animosity against me until the newbie who I referred to the job poached my regular clients". Notably, some of the women, who felt they performed better and worked harder than their female Vietnamese coworkers, did not have a close relationship with the other members of their ethnic group in their workplace due to their different work values. Erin said, "Once I worked with some Vietnamese sisters in a massage spa. My work values were different from theirs. I worked harder and performed better than the other Vietnamese coworkers. Some of them were lazy and weren't honest. They were jealous of my better work performance and usually spoke ill of me. If I had gone with them, I would have lowered my performance. Instead, I like to make friends with Taiwanese coworkers". In such a defensively hostile and unfriendly workplace, the women learned to protect themselves by maintaining hypocritical relationships with other members of their ethnic group. They also sought sincere sisterhood from other ethnic women outside of the workplace. As Erin noted, "Maybe there is no true friendship in the workplace. Therefore, I always have close and sincere relationships with my Vietnamese female friends who don't work with me".

Due to national labor policies, there are many migrant laborers from southeastern Asia working menial jobs in Taiwan, especially nursing, factory and construction workers (Konrad 2019). These participants sometimes work with these ethnic female foreign laborers. Due to migrant workers' limited professional competency and low status in the Taiwanese workplace, the participants tried to distinguish themselves from these ethnic migrant workers by identifying as marriage immigrant women, emphasizing their professional and positional differences in employment, and even keeping their distance from these migrant laborers. Dawn, who worked as a care attendant, said, "My new clients usually misunderstood and treated me as a migrant nursing worker. However, I always tell my clients that although we work as care attendants and are from the same country, we are different. I did get professional training and licenses . . . . Because I can communicate with them, I'm usually assigned to direct these migrant laborers' work".

Additionally, in the workplaces other immigrant women are essential customers, particularly in the catering and beauty industries. However, other Vietnamese immigrant women seem to demonstrate their superiority and to hide their envy of the participants by deprecating their services. "Compared with Taiwanese clients, Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant clients are much more critical of my manicure services and facilities and are easily provoked, even though they like to get my regular services. They seem jealous that I own my business. Despite hating to serve my ethnic group, I must make business," said Bess, the owner of a nail salon.

Most of these women felt that their cross-border marriage immigrant background contributed to their job searching and employment performance. Specifically, Vietnamese sisters' referrals to jobs as well as the women's hard work and ability to endure hardships and solve problems, which originated from their prior Vietnamese socialization and were confirmed by Taiwanese employers, helped them obtain jobs and facilitated their job performance. The participants who worked as manicurists were proud of the skills that were obtained in Vietnam to promote their businesses. As a microbusiness owner, Fay noted, "I can directly import food and dress materials from Vietnam to produce original Vietnamese cuisine and dresses because I worked on the same jobs and have many resources in Vietnam. Most Taiwanese owners in the Vietnamese food and dress sectors can't compete with me in these aspects".

However, these women also believe that their commercially arranged marriage immigrant status sometimes resulted in lower salaries, depreciation by coworkers and clients, and rejection from certain popular jobs, such as coffee shop servers or wedding makeup artists. Specifically, some clients or customers did not trust the occupational ability of Vietnamese women who worked as resident care attendants or catering attendants. "When I started to work as a resident attendant, some Taiwanese clients treated me as a foreign laborer and doubted my professionalism, and some even rejected my services just because of my marriage immigrant status," Dawn said. Facing these challenges, the women believed that as female immigrant women, they had to struggle to prove their commitment and competency by working much more diligently than their Taiwanese counterparts, including by actively supporting coworkers, doing more work voluntarily, and improving their occupational performance. Their perseverance was rooted in these women's struggle against their previous life hardships and labor market experiences in Vietnam. The findings reflect Taiwanese gendered racialism against marriage immigrant women, whereas the cultural capital the immigrant women brought functioned to integrate them into Taiwan and played an essential role in their employment adaptation (Grahame 1998).

Unlike racialized immigrant women in North America and Europe, who usually experience job-skill mismatch and lengthy unemployment between precarious work (e.g., Premji et al. 2014), the women in this study worked in positions similar to or even higher than the jobs they held in Vietnam and faced no barriers to obtaining work in the early stage of their employment in Taiwan. This difference could be explained by the fact that their awareness of their lack of professional experience made these participants value menial jobs, and their hard-working attitudes helped them obtain subsequent employment

opportunities. This finding may also be due to the small- and medium-sized industrial structure in the Taiwanese labor market, where there is always a lack of menial labor (Wang 2001).

Just as many high-skilled immigrant women in North America, in the early stage of their employment in Taiwan, these participants all worked as cheap laborers in the shadow economy in catering, cleaning, and construction, which are characterized by low pay, high instability, and social undervalue and are typically assigned to racialized immigrant women. This is what postcolonial feminists refer to as the “racialized-gendered division of labor” (Premji et al. 2014).

However, upon completing vocational training, obtaining professional certificates and acquiring knowledge of Taiwanese culture and the labor market, these participants gradually reached typical employment, such as full-time formal jobs with security, and some even attained stable micro-entrepreneurships in the catering, personal service, beauty, and production industries. Notably, Vietnamese immigrant women’s beauty services are well-known in many host countries (Gold 2014). In this study, Bess and Erin, who had worked in beauty services in their homeland, did not perform such jobs in Taiwan until they completed beauty vocation training. Indeed, vocational training in Taiwan improved their employment self-confidence, even though they felt that skin care and manicure professionalism was much better in Vietnam than in Taiwan.

It is also worth noting that except for cleaning ladies, most Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan tend not to work as domestic and care workers in Taiwanese living places because of their refusal to be misunderstood as foreign laborers and the risk of discrimination by the Taiwanese due to the inferiority of their immigration backgrounds. “My Vietnamese friends feel their limited knowledge of Taiwanese culture can’t satisfy Taiwanese personal care needs. Moreover, they are afraid their Vietnamese marriage immigrant status will be discriminated against because the Taiwanese are particularly critical of personal services in their private places,” Dawn said. “However, it is ridiculous that most Taiwanese would rather hire Vietnamese immigrant laborers instead of Vietnamese marriage immigrant women to take care of their elderly or babies”. This finding is different from the employment enclaves of low-skilled immigrant women in North America and Europe, who tend to work as caregivers for the elderly and babies as they enter the host labor markets (Espin 2013). The difference may be due to the special foreign labor policy in Taiwan mentioned above and the Taiwanese prejudice against commercially arranged marriage immigrant women.

It was not surprising that all of the participants were satisfied with their gradually improved employment quality at the time of interviews, including work environment, security, and welfare. They enjoyed their work, their work performance was praised by their employers and customers, and they were all confident in their excellent work performance and industrious work attitudes. “I am satisfied with the current job, which is much better than the ones I had worked in Taiwan and in Vietnam. I can see my customers are happy due to my services, and I can juggle work and family. The income is not high, but it’s not bad for me,” said Gail, who obtained a two-year junior high education. Although some of the women were not satisfied with their salaries, they understood that the salary they received matched their education and work experiences.

In fact, to generate more income, some of these women even worked two or more jobs. In addition to work, family responsibility is an essential part of the day. Most research has suggested that family responsibilities are a hurdle to immigrant women’s employment because the primary responsibility of immigrant women who arrive in receiving countries as dependents of their husbands is to facilitate the family’s settlement in the new state (e.g., Martins and Reid 2007). However, in this study, although they took their socioculturally defined roles as good wives and mothers seriously, these women never viewed their family responsibilities as an obstacle to labor market participation. Some of the women asked for their husbands’ and in-laws’ assistance with chores, child-rearing, and even their work based on their economic contribution to the family. Generally, the excessive workload in

workplaces and their domestic responsibility intersect to create much more than “a double workday”. This was particularly true for the divorced women. As Alice, who took her child to the workplace, noted, “Initially, when divorcing, I worked as a masseuse at a night spa from 8:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. the next day. I took my 7-year-old daughter to the spa. She did homework and then slept until I was off work. Then, I took her home in the early morning. After my daughter went to school, I continued to work in the beverage stand”.

For the divorced participants, playing the intensified roles of mother and employee was difficult but never created distress. As Bess noted, “The time after divorcing was difficult for me because I had to struggle more to earn a living. However, I felt relaxed and autonomous without being a battered wife of a drunk man”.

#### *4.4. Gaining Empowerment and Agency by Negotiating Voice and Identity*

After an average of 12.8 years of stable employment in Taiwan, these immigrants were empowered to defend their rights outside and inside the home by negotiating their identity and voice.

In the early stage of employment, their unfamiliarity with the Taiwanese workplace culture and their lack of Taiwanese proficiency and self-confidence caused these participants to remain silent in the margins as a form of self-cover of their migration backgrounds and self-protection as they navigated their Taiwanese workplaces. Gradually, the women discovered the shortcomings of silence and the strength of their voices in demonstrating personal employability and commitment at work. With their improving Taiwanese proficiency, increasing knowledge of Taiwanese workplace culture, praise from employers and good interpersonal relationships, these women built self-confidence and self-identity and negotiated the use of their voices to prove their existence, defend their employment rights and develop their ethnic identities. Working as a resident care attendant, Dawn said, “Because of my silence, some clients assigned to me extra unreasonable work and would even do things to deliberately wrong me, such as telling my employer that I stole their stuff. Therefore, I decided to voice to defend myself”.

Initially, when their coworkers and customers explicitly or implicitly expressed stereotypes about marriage immigrant women, such as immigrant women’s desire to make money without caring for the family and the high divorce rate among female immigrants, they tended to be silent despite feeling insulted. These participants gradually realized that they could defend themselves and their ethnic sisters by gently refuting those prejudices and that Taiwanese respect for immigrant women depended not only on their own performance but also on their proactive voicing.

Moreover, some of these immigrant women encouraged each other to bravely raise their voices to protect themselves and other immigrant women in Taiwan when they obtained considerable employment experience, such as working as court interpreters. Some of these women even established female immigrant associations to defend their rights. As Hulda noted, “Working as a court interpreter to help immigrant women express their ideas in the court, I found many of them were silent victims of domestic violence and their workplaces . . . These work experiences drove some immigrant sisters and me to establish an association for immigrant women to support female immigrants in protecting our rights in Taiwan”.

Furthermore, after becoming accustomed to the Taiwanese workplace, being encouraged by other immigrant women’s achievement of self-employment, and developing a stronger self-identity based on employment performance, some of the participants started their own businesses, such as a nail salon or a Vietnamese eatery. They actively introduced Vietnamese products to Taiwanese customers; in turn, this helped the participants to understand their homeland and improve their cultural identity. As Erin noted, “In the beginning, I was reluctant to make visible my original nationality. However, I found many of our immigrant women did very well at manicure work. After working as a manicurist at the beauty salon for a few years, I ran a studio. Most importantly, I purposefully used Vietnamese tools and cosmetic products. Because of their trust in me, my customers gradually came to

like the Vietnamese cosmetic products. In fact, I also found that I love and understand my homeland more by doing so”.

Steady participation in the Taiwanese labor market, which required these women to achieve a certain level of Taiwanese proficiency and employability and expanded their knowledge, represented significant progress for the participants. Furthermore, their increased income improved the financial situations of both their Taiwanese and Vietnamese families and even made some of these women the primary income earners in their Taiwanese families. These achievements improved these women’s self-confidence as well as their economic and life independence, which further contributed to their negotiation of their responsibilities and defense of their rights inside the home.

Through Taiwanese social networks that supported them with divorce information and encouragement as well as the agency they developed through working, some of the participants, such as Bess and Erin, sought to divorce their husbands, who were unemployed and battered them, to gain autonomy and freedom. As Erin said, “I had to work hard to support the whole family, but my ex-husband didn’t work or help with the housework and even battered me. I lived painfully. Because of my employment, I earned some money to support my son and myself. Some Taiwanese coworkers helped me when my husband battered me in my workplace. So, I got more courage to tackle my marriage problems. Finally, I decided to divorce my ex-husband without considering others’ opinions”.

## 5. Discussion

The marriage immigrant women in this study committed to the welfare of their family in the early stage of immigration, but they began to pursue their careers after becoming settled in Taiwan, and some of them even became the primary breadwinners in their families. The employment process of these Vietnamese marriage immigrant women is different from that outlined in studies of both highly skilled immigrant women and women with low education levels who come to North America and Europe as dependents. These previous studies have suggested that female immigrants’ precarious employment is a continuation of cultural patterns and family obligations, and that these women tend to leave the workplace when their family achieves upward mobility (Martins and Reid 2007; Zhou and Nordquist 1994). That is, the employment of immigrant women who are dependents usually seems to be a matter of survival, while the marriage immigrant women in this study sought work for both survival and career development. There may be two advantageous factors that drove the Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in this study to pursue career development after they were settled in Taiwan: their strong career aspirations, which originated from their prior socialization, some structural factors, and the small- and medium-sized industrial structure of the Taiwanese labor market, which provides opportunities for work and career development (Tang and Wang 2011). Obviously, the personal characteristics and external economic structures of the host society interact to affect marriage immigrant women’s work motivations.

The results of this study reveal that the employment of the participants was a learning process in which they obtained professional socialization and learned to negotiate their identity and voices. In terms of occupational learning, all of the participants attended vocational training programs that were delivered in a Taiwanese-centered way to obtain certain certificates that would provide them with a socially acceptable status and promote their employment opportunities (Wu 2022). In fact, occupational training for immigrant women, which is increasingly organized by institutions and the government, privileges the dominant culture and perpetuates the existing sociocultural order in the host labor market. The pitfall for immigrant women is that desirable learning is defined for them as adaptation to the mainstream society of the host country (Shan and Guo 2013).

The results of the study suggest that in the host country, the Vietnamese immigrant women did not tend to have close relationships with their ethnic group members in the workplace. The meritocracy in the workplace may have prevented these immigrant women

from sincerely working together. Additionally, immigrant women may feel that it would be more difficult for them to compete with natives in the workplace. Instead, they may tend to view the members of their ethnic group as possible competitors (Dlamini et al. 2012). To compensate for their conflicting sentiments in the workplace, these immigrant women find comfort in going with members of their own cultural group outside of the workplace. In addition, due to their status as migrant laborers, ethnic migrant laborers seemed to be perceived as inferior by the marriage immigrant women in this study. This hostility may originate from the stratified boundaries among immigrants based on their modes of entry into Taiwan. Moreover, the differentiated attitudes of Taiwanese toward migrant workers and marriage immigrant women may contribute to the perceived differences among immigrants in Taiwan. Entry-based hostility among immigrants might cause internalized racism, which occurs when a disadvantaged group reproduces dominant stereotypes to exclude other disadvantaged groups, eventually surrendering themselves to the same rules of racialization (Lan 2006). These findings obviously support the sociocultural approach, which extends the concept of employment to include interactions in a community of workers (Rogoff 1995). Moreover, these results suggest that although these marriage immigrant women actively developed their agency in resisting oppression, sometimes they seemed to act as persecutors of migrant laborers from their ethnic group in the workplace.

In this study, the conflicting attitudes of the immigrant women's husbands toward their wives' employment and immigrant women's participation in the pornographic industry reflect the issues of sexuality and femininity in immigrant women's employment, which enforces Taiwanese discrimination against marriage immigrant women (Chang 2008). In the Taiwanese patriarchal society, marriage immigrant women's sexuality is demonized as so dangerous and threatening to their family that it must be regulated through multiple mechanisms, such as employment choices and limited social boundaries (Fathzadeh 2002). Unlike the findings of other studies in which migrant women continue their traditional gender roles and sexuality (Espin 2013) to keep their sense of safety, this study found that marriage immigrant women's husbands police expected gender roles and conservative expressions of sexuality among their wives due to their commercially arranged cross-border marriages. However, these marriage immigrant women's economic contributions to their families allowed them to expand their employment choices, including working as beauticians and masseuses, which are sometimes relevant to the expression of women's sexuality and femininity. This finding reflects the transformation of these marriage immigrant women's sexuality and power inside the home due to their empowerment and supports poststructural feminism, which focuses on women's active agency in resisting oppressive forces and shaping their lives (Weedon 1987). Notably, working in the pornographic sector makes immigrant women vulnerable to employment exploitation, low self-esteem, social exclusion, and stigmatization (Morokvasic et al. 2009).

In this study, the marriage immigrant women perceived their work as meaningful and a source of hope, and were satisfied with their work even though their work quality was inferior to that of their Taiwanese counterparts. This finding suggests that for these women, participation in the menial labor market may create particular sociocultural contexts in which obtaining low-paid jobs does not automatically mean being exploited. Instead, it is a key to supporting their family's survival, and it might be compensated for by their career advancement. Furthermore, this result might suggest that these low-skilled women have humble self-awareness of their limited human capital because they may have no other choices but to accept substandard labor practices to accentuate their positive attitudes toward adaptation in Taiwan rather than their submissiveness, which may result from their prior socialization affected by Confucianism<sup>2</sup> (Wu 2022). In addition, these women applied their past employment experiences in their home country as the reference point to evaluate their current work situation in Taiwan. For immigrant women, the choice of reference may act as a buffer against the struggles they face in the Taiwanese workforce (Sun 1987).

Women who immigrate from less economically developed nations to Taiwan through commercial marriage arrangements are particularly expected to be deferential wives in

the Taiwanese patriarchal society (Yang et al. 2015). Additionally, in Vietnam, married women are usually destined to be subservient wives with no recourse to divorce (Bui 2003). However, in this study, despite social pressure from their Vietnamese and Taiwanese communities and the “loss of face” their natal family may experience, some of these marriage immigrant women still divorced their husbands after obtaining empowerment through stable labor market participation, self-empowerment and social networks. This result reveals that the employment of marriage immigrant women is a way to support the survival of their families and to continue their Vietnamese customs of being a working woman and contributing to society. Thus, their labor market participation not only threatens but also may deconstruct the power traditions of the Taiwanese patriarchy by allowing them to renegotiate their self-identities and positions within their families and Taiwanese society (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Indeed, in Taiwan, approximately one in five transnational marriages ends in divorce, and the share of divorced female immigrants gradually increases after they procure stable work in Taiwan (Ministry of the Interior 2022a). In fact, many Taiwanese men who marry immigrant women tend to keep their wives within limited social boundaries lest they “run away” or gain subversive knowledge (Wu 2014). However, their husbands’ control and sociocultural expectations still cannot prohibit these immigrant women from aspiring to greater autonomy and independence through empowerment gained from stable employment. Such a change in gender relations in transnational marriage suggests that women can be viewed as active agents in cross-border marriages who are able to exercise a certain level of kinship-based power (Robinson 2007; Tang and Wang 2011). The findings of this study reflect these immigrant women’s shifts in identity and position in their families and in society. Their active role transformation and continuous construction of self-identity helped them adjust well to life in their receiving country (Olivier et al. 2018). Thus, the findings support poststructural feminism, which states that women always develop their sustainable agency to generate new possibilities (Weedon 1987). Furthermore, the results of this study echo the sociocultural approach, which emphasizes that in employment, individuals and contexts interact in critical ways and are mutually constitutive (Koopmans 2016).

## 6. Conclusions

Drawing on nine life history interviews with Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in Taiwan, this study explores how sociocultural contexts affected the participants’ employment experiences by focusing on their position and voice. The major findings are that these low-skilled women embraced the instrumental value of labor to work in Taiwan to accumulate economic, cultural, and human capital. They worked to become desirable workers by negotiating with their husbands and participating in vocational training. Despite increasingly better employment quality, they still faced more than a double workday. Stable employment empowered these women’s voices and identities, and some even divorced their husbands to seek autonomy. The results of this study suggest that employment was significant for the daily lives of these immigrant women, whose marital situations generated both abundant possibilities and painful disappointments (Constable 2003). Obviously, their prior socialization in Vietnam, their marriage immigration background, their life experiences and the economic structure in Taiwan interacted to impact the labor market participation of these female marriage immigrants. Contrary to the image of the disadvantaged immigrant woman in the receiving country depicted in some reports (Constable 2005), these female Vietnamese marriage immigrants progressively developed their agency and voices to generate new life meanings. Therefore, the findings of this study extend the feminist perspective by focusing on the personal potential empowerment and sustainable agency of low-skilled female marriage immigrants through their employment in host countries.

The Vietnamese immigrant women in this study treasured their low-wage employment, and accepting such substandard work seemed to be an effective strategy for immigrant women from less economically developed countries to achieve empowerment.

However, it might be a trap in their lives and work careers, as it may be difficult for these women to achieve long-term upward social mobility (Wu 2022). Thus, policies should be directed toward promoting the human capital of immigrant women by offering culturally responsive vocational training. Furthermore, it is essential to continually implement multicultural education to build a multicultural society in Taiwan by educating Taiwanese people about the plight of immigrant women and introducing anti-racism education in schools to reduce prejudice and discrimination against immigrant women. Additionally, because negotiating their identities and voices in the workplace, which is a dynamic social process, is essential for the career development of disadvantaged immigrant women, it warrants more research attention. Furthermore, the expression of sexuality and femininity in the employment of commercially arranged marriage immigrant women, which is related to women's gender roles and empowerment, warrants further investigation.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available due to the privacy of the participants.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Commercially arranged marriages are transnational marriages that are organized through commercial brokers. Men, the paying customers, are in poor financial situations or live in rural areas and have difficulty finding wives in their home countries. Women from less-developed countries aspire to improve their livelihoods and those of their families through migration. Commercial marriage matchmakers provide marital opportunities for these men and women (Bélanger et al. 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Confucianism has been one of the most influential philosophies in eastern Asia. Confucianism emphasizes personal morality and tolerance, which contribute to the harmony of the environment in which a person lives (Wu 2022).

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