



NEW AMERICA  
MEDIA

**Women Immigrants:  
*Stewards of the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century Family***

*February, 2009*



## Introduction

The story of migration, as it has traditionally been told, has been a masculine epic. But in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as women began immigrating to America in ever-growing numbers, the migration story became increasingly a woman's tale as well. Women are now on the move, as much so as men. But their narrative is different from that of their male predecessors – they are migrating not as lone individuals but as members, even heads, of families, determined to keep family bonds intact even as they travel great distances and adapt to new cultures.

Until the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great gender imbalance, with males predominating in the migrant stream. Today, this balance has shifted to the point that women actually comprise half or more of the immigrants entering this country. Equally dramatic, women now make up over half of the migrant population worldwide.

What our poll finds is that women are an integral part of the epic global event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travelling alongside men in the great migration from village to city, from home country to America. This journey, in stages, has activated women. Uprooted from the village, resettled in the city, they were not about to let the male leave in the name of preserving family, only to fracture the family unit with his absence. In growing numbers, women decided to cross oceans and borders also, either to join the male once he had settled, or to move (and thereby preserve) the entire family as a unit.

The result has been a transformation in the nature of the migration narrative itself. Immigration, long viewed by Americans through the Horatio Alger lens of self-discovery and reinvention, as seen through the eyes of women immigrants is a communal endeavor, driven by an imperative to hold family structures together. When women come to America, they come as wives and as mothers.

Ma Joad may have said it best in the early chapters *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's fictional account of the great domestic migration from the devastated Dust Bowl states to the promise of California, when she announced that if ailing Grandpa Joad wasn't joining the family on the move to California, then no one was going. The family traveled together.

Today's migration, we know, increasingly occurs between city and city. The story that has not been told is the story of the woman immigrant in that stream. This poll is an effort to capture her narrative, and what becomes clear in the responses – many to questions that seemed on their face to have nothing to do with family *per se* – is that the gold thread giving meaning to her life is family stewardship. As the poll demonstrates, it's a goal at which she has been remarkably successful. Some 90 percent of women immigrants interviewed (30 percent of whom are undocumented) report their family units are intact – their husbands live with them, and their children were either born here or have joined them in this country.

The accomplishment has required women immigrants to overcome formidable barriers – the language barrier (over 60% of Latin American, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese immigrant women still say they have not mastered the English language), anti-immigrant discrimination, lack of health care, and low-paying jobs well below the status of professional jobs many of them held in home countries.

In meeting these challenges as they settle into America, many of these women are also radically altering their roles in their private lives. While few may have fit the image of submissive women in their home countries to begin with, almost one-third report having assumed head-of-household responsibilities now that they are here, and share equally with their husbands in making decisions from household finances to more intimate concerns like family planning. Almost all reported success in increasing their income levels (some dramatically more than others, reflecting differences in education levels), which suggests skillful navigation of the public life/labor market in America.

These shifts in household politics mark another break from the past, when it was often men who migrated from the village and sent money back from the city, or from a foreign job. Today, as women have "left" the village, they have also brought the village with them. In their new city, they are the ones who are keeping the family intact – acting as the public voice and face of the family, ensuring the health and education of the children and their entrance into the new society.

The most telling indicator of their role as family stewards is the fact that women say they are the main drivers in their families when it comes to seeking citizenship. It is women who are changing the meaning of migration from economic to civic; women who are the key figures in determining whether or not the new immigrant populations will find themselves (both literally and figuratively) "at home" in the American city in a lasting way.

Underscoring the centrality of family as the motivation for making a permanent home in a new country, women immigrants named "securing family stability" as the primary motivator in their pursuit of citizenship. A second reason, some said, is to vote in elections.

In the twenty-first century, the face of the immigrant is that of a mother. The women polled for this survey reveal that they came to the United States not in search of "streets paved with gold" – making money was surprisingly low on the list of priorities throughout the survey – but because they saw the United States as a place to build better futures for their children, and to make permanent homes for their families. At a moment when more than one-third of families in the United States are single parent headed households, 90 percent of them are raising their children in intact marriages. At a time of unprecedented economic and social turmoil in the larger society -- when both familial and economic stability seem more elusive and more intertwined than ever -- women immigrants clearly have much to teach and much to offer the country where they seek to make a family home.

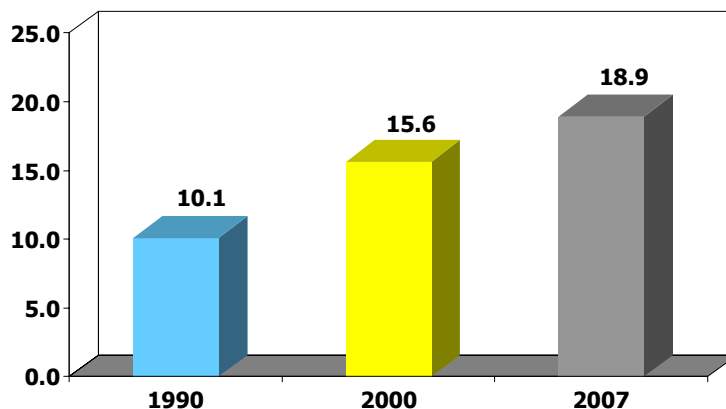
*This poll was funded in part by grants to New America Media from Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corp., Ford Foundation, and the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund.*

**A. THE GROWTH OF WOMEN IN THE IMMIGRANT STREAM**

As of 2005, according the United Nations, there were approximately 100 million migrant women across the world.

**Immigrant Women in the United States  
(in millions)**

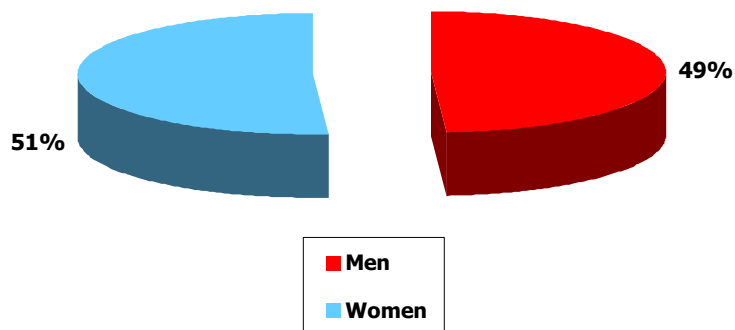
CHART 1



Source: United States Census

**Immigrants in the United States**

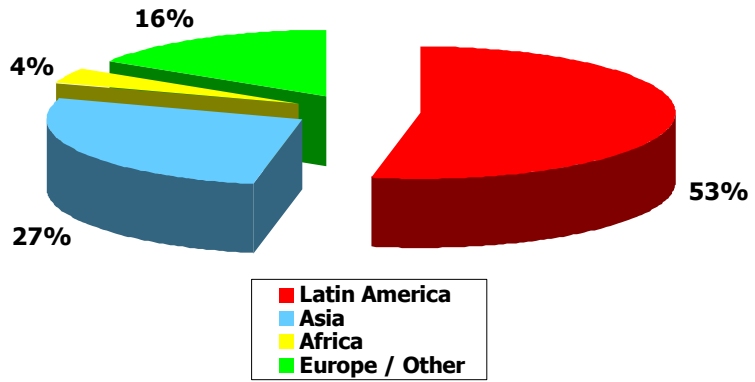
CHART 2



Source: United States Census

### Immigrant Women in the United States *By Country of Origin*

CHART 3



Source: United States Census

## **B. WHO WAS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS SURVEY (METHODOLOGY)**

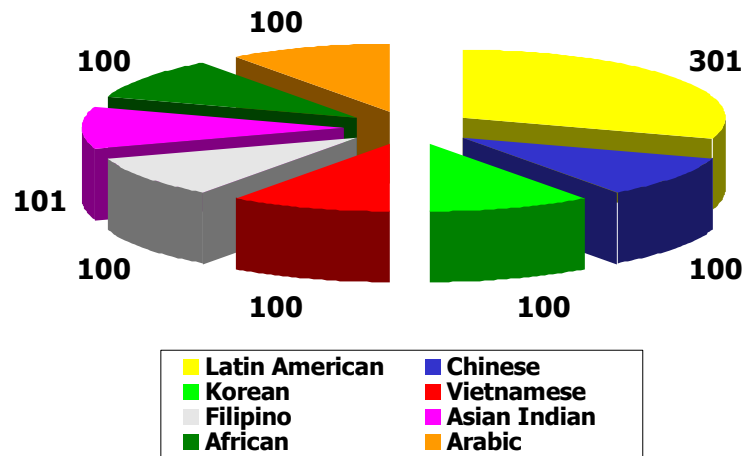
This public opinion research study was sponsored by New America Media. The results and findings in this executive summary are based on a poll of female immigrants who were born in Latin American, Asian, African, and Arab countries. The complete results for all questions asked in the survey, including results for each of the ethnic groups studied, can be found in the appendix. The sample was designed to be representative of the adult population of female immigrants in the United States, and the survey was conducted during the months of August and September of 2008. A total of 1,002 interviews were conducted via telephone using professionally trained multilingual interviewers. Latin American respondents were interviewed in English or Spanish; Asian respondents were interviewed in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hindi or Tagalog; African respondents were interviewed in English; and Arabic respondents were interviewed in English, Arabic, or Amharic.

RDD (Random Digit Dialing) methodology was employed in areas of the country that have significant (10 percent or more) Latin American, Asian, African and Arabic populations. Using RDD methodology allows for maximum coverage and ensures that respondents with non-Latin American, non-Asian, non-African, or non-Arabic names and those with unlisted telephone numbers are not systematically excluded from the sample. In lower-density (less than 10 percent) areas of the country, ethnic encoding methodology was employed. Ethnic encoding allows for the identification of potential respondents using first and last name algorithms. The combination of RDD (80 percent of interviews) and ethnic encoding (20 percent of interviews) methodologies results in the collection of the most comprehensive and representative samples of these populations. The margin of error for the total sample is approximately 3 percentage points.



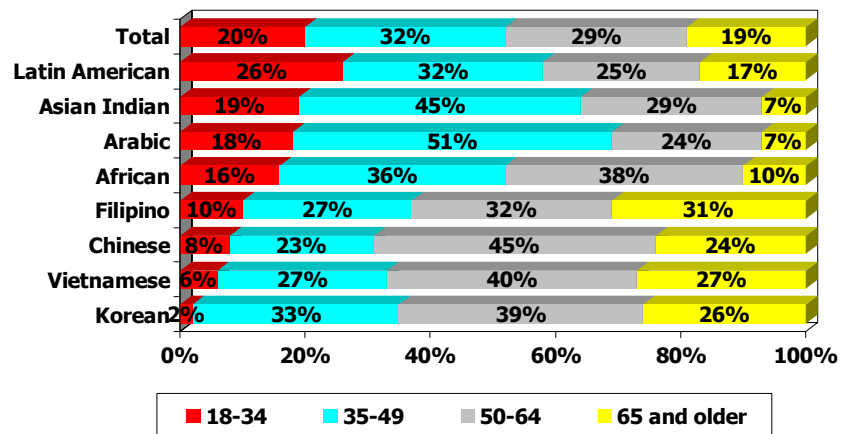
## Sample distribution

CHART 4



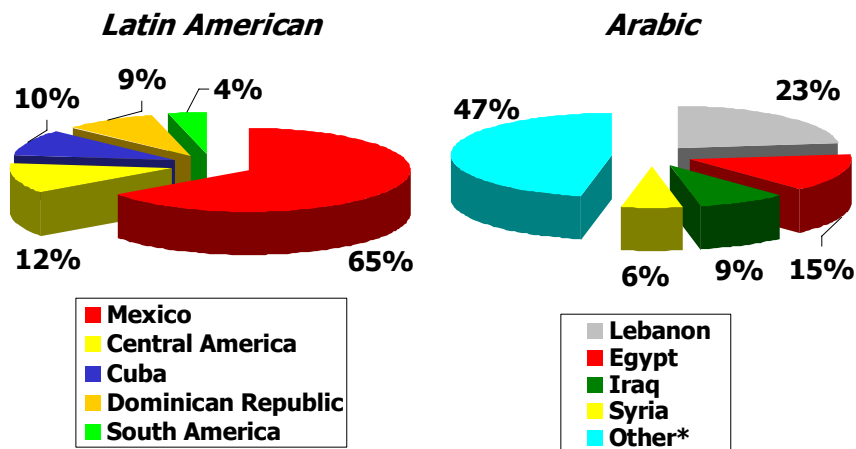
## Age

CHART 5



### Country of Birth

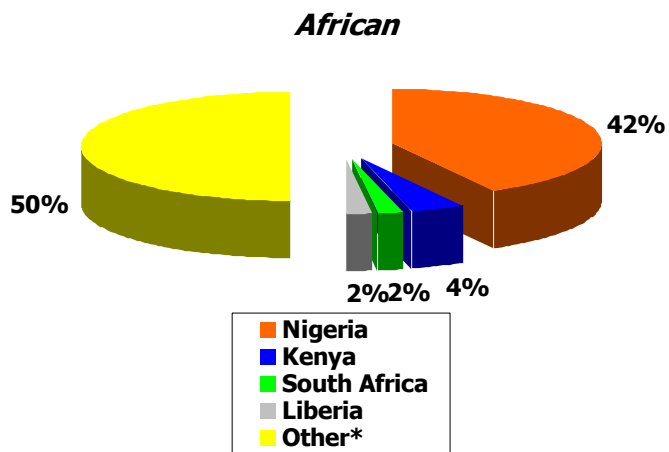
CHART 6



\*Includes: Palestine, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia

### Country of Birth

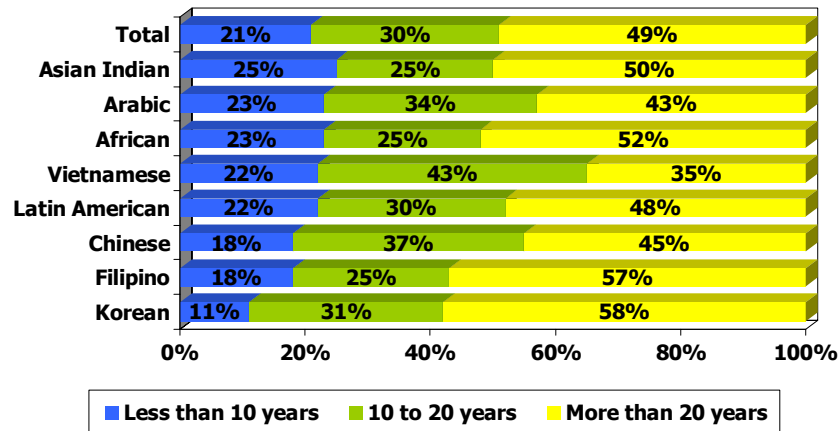
CHART 7



\*Includes: Sudan, Ghana, Uganda, Cameroon, Rwanda

## How many years have you been living in the United States?

CHART 8



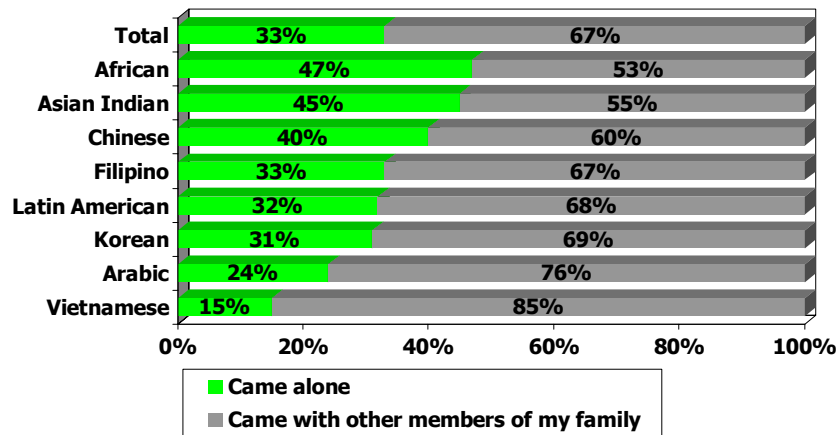
## How old were you when you first arrived in the United States?

CHART 9

	0 to 17	18 to 25	26 to 35	36 to 50	Over 50
Total	18%	31%	28%	13%	5%
Arabic	25%	24%	34%	11%	2%
Latin American	22%	34%	26%	9%	5%
African	18%	41%	28%	6%	1%
Asian Indian	15%	41%	33%	9%	0%
Filipino	14%	18%	33%	19%	6%
Vietnamese	13%	12%	22%	31%	19%
Chinese	5%	23%	29%	33%	9%
Korean	1%	25%	48%	19%	6%

### When you first came to the U.S., did you come alone or did you come with other family?

CHART 10



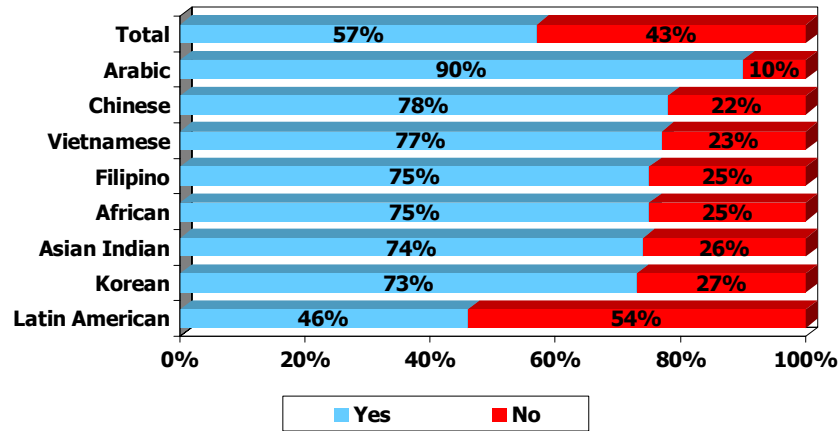
### What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

CHART 11

	<i>Less than high school</i>	<i>High school graduate</i>	<i>Some college / technical school</i>	<i>College degree</i>	<i>Graduate degree</i>
Total	34%	26%	11%	15%	12%
Latin American	46%	29%	13%	7%	5%
Vietnamese	32%	44%	5%	8%	10%
Chinese	17%	21%	11%	33%	18%
Arabic	14%	19%	14%	29%	22%
Korean	12%	28%	4%	39%	12%
Filipino	9%	15%	14%	33%	26%
African	6%	13%	20%	26%	26%
Asian Indian	2%	5%	5%	34%	50%

## Are you a citizen of the United States?

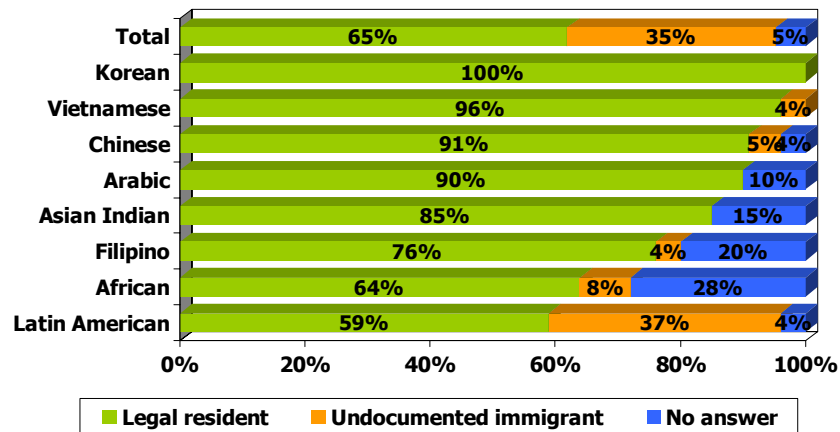
CHART 12



## Are you a legal resident or an undocumented immigrant?

*Asked only of respondents who are not citizens*

CHART 13



**C. WHY IMMIGRANT WOMEN COME TO THE UNITED STATES**

Women immigrants said that the main reason they came to the United States was to join family members who were already here.

**What was the main reason you decided to come to the United States?**

CHART 14

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Latin American</i>	<i>African</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Korean</i>	<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Asian Indian</i>	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>Filipino</i>
To join family members already in U.S.	<b>38%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>64%</b>
To make a better life for my children	22%	27%	9%	24%	25%	14%	9%	6%	13%
To pursue higher education	7%	2%	33%	20%	17%	16%	15%	2%	4%
To get a job and make money	17%	23%	7%	8%	11%	12%	11%	1%	6%
To be able to send money home to my family	5%	7%	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%
To become an American citizen	2%	1%	2%	2%	0%	2%	2%	1%	6%
To get asylum as a political refugee	5%	4%	6%	1%	1%	8%	0%	28%	0%

## D. CHALLENGES IMMIGRANT WOMEN FACE ONCE THEY ARRIVE

### 1. Immigrant women face serious economic barriers during their first years in the United States, but see their most important challenge as helping their children succeed

Many immigrant women migrate to the United States because of the lack of economic opportunities in their home countries. Although a majority of women immigrants found a job within their first year in the United States, the poll indicates that they faced substantial economic hardships during their first year. The majority earned about one hundred dollars per week at their first job in the United States.

Nevertheless, when asked to name the biggest challenge they faced as women immigrants in the United States, the majority did not cite economic difficulties. Rather, "helping my children achieve success" and "being able to hold my family together" were the top answers to this question -- underscoring the importance of family in understanding the motivations and aspirations of this new wave of women immigrants.

### What is the biggest challenge you face as a woman immigrant in the United States?

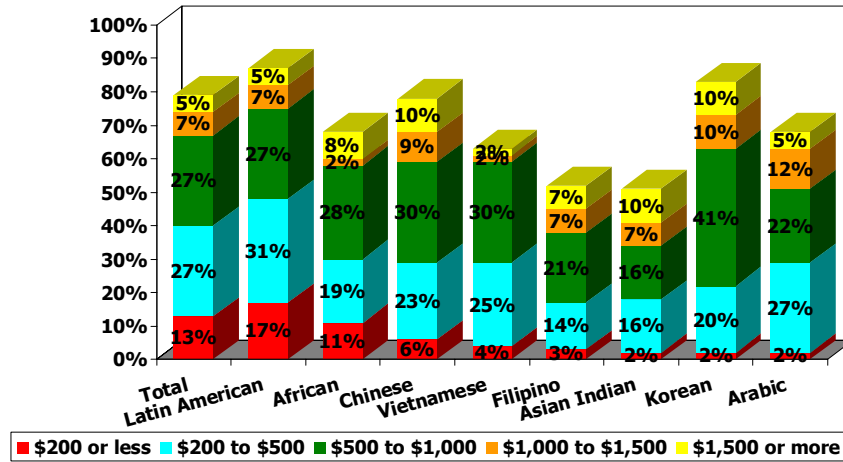
#### *Top 3 responses*

CHART 15

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Korean</i>	<i>Latin American</i>	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>Filipino</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Arabic</i>	<i>African</i>	<i>Asian Indian</i>
Helping my children achieve success	<b>50%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>31%</b>
Being able to hold my family together	18%	5%	19%	18%	16%	20%	27%	12%	14%
Making enough money to take care of my family	17%	14%	17%	20%	12%	23%	8%	22%	12%
Other / Don't know / No answer	15%	14%	10%	14%	27%	20%	30%	32%	43%

### Approximately how much money did you earn monthly at your first job in the U.S.?

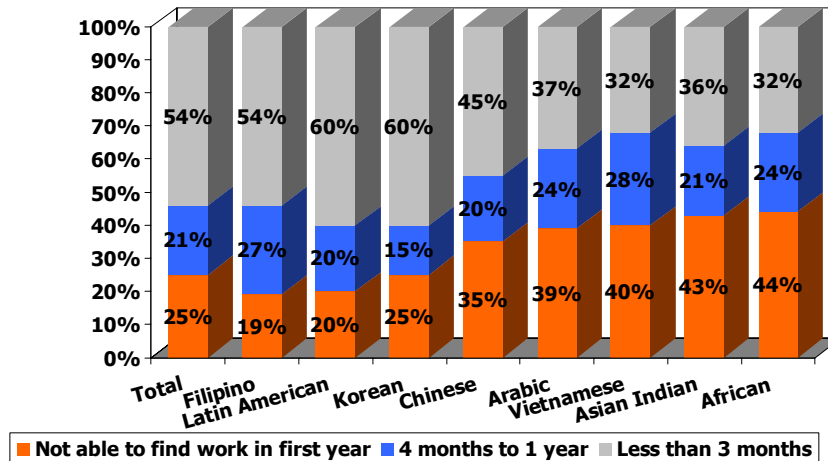
CHART 16



**Average: \$500 / month**

### How long did it take you to find work when you arrived in the United States?

CHART 17

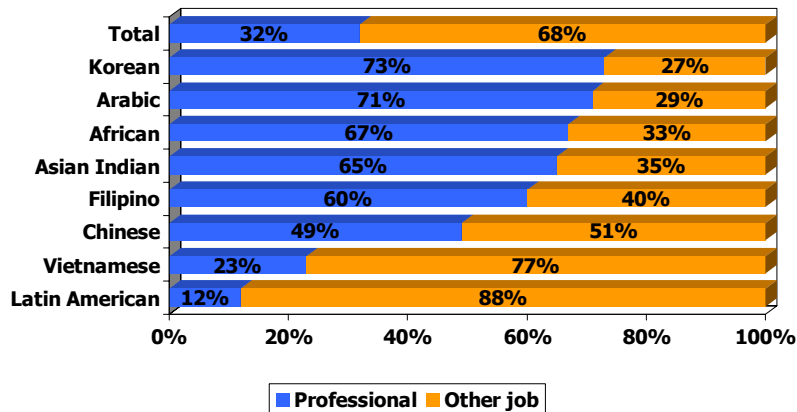




A majority of immigrant women from China, Korea, the Philippines, India, Africa and Arabic countries describe their last job in their home country as “professional.” The study reveals that a substantial percentage of them have not found comparable employment in the United States. Their current jobs in America include working as a hotel maid, restaurant waitress, factory technician, house cleaner, and textile worker. Combined with other poll findings indicating the centrality of family and opportunity for children in women's migration narratives, this indicates that women may well be putting devotion to the well-being of their families ahead of personal pride in choosing the journey to America.

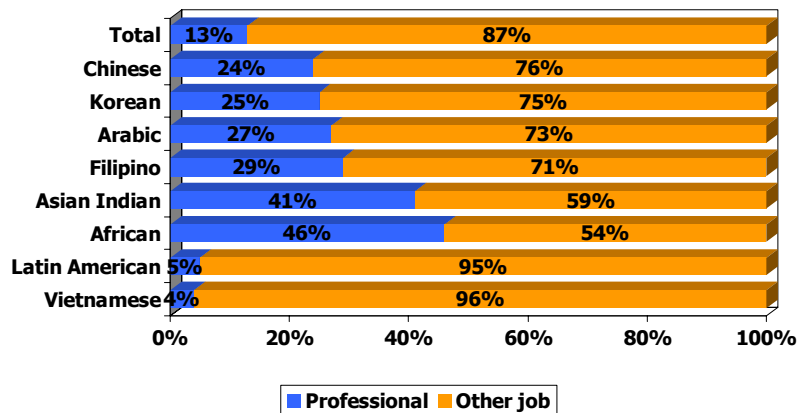
### What type of job did you have in your home country the year before you came to the United States?

CHART 18



### What type of work do you do now?

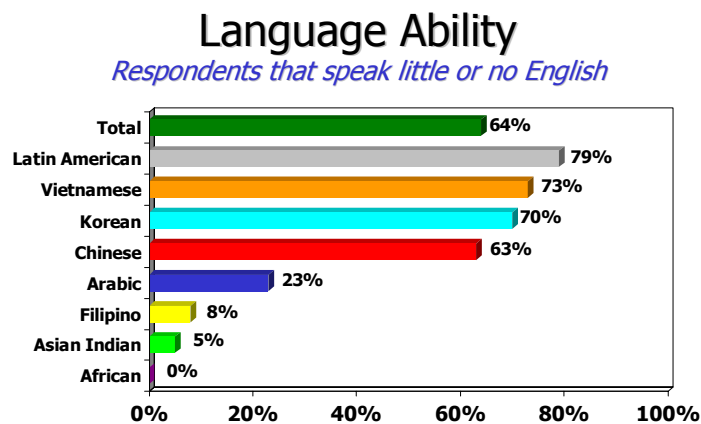
CHART 19



**2. The “language barrier” is a major problem for immigrant women. A significant percentage of them do not speak English proficiently after living in the United States for several years.**

A clear majority of immigrant women from Latin America, China, Korea and Vietnam report that their English proficiency is very limited. Many of them reveal that they only speak Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean or Vietnamese or that – at most –they can only speak a few words of English.

CHART 20

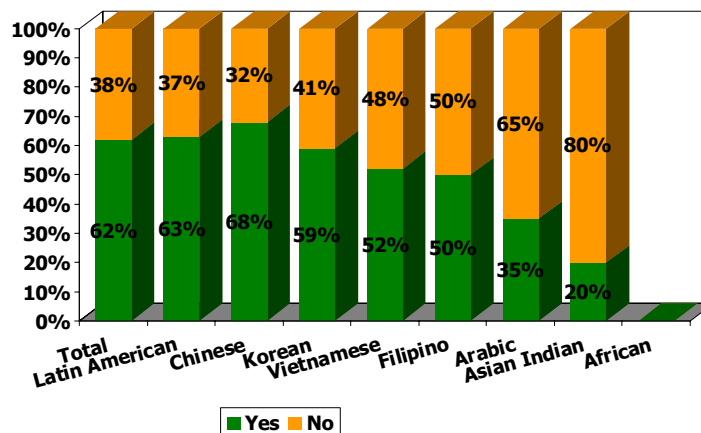


The study indicates that a majority of women immigrants from Latin America, China, Korea and Vietnam do not yet speak English, although a substantial percentage of them have enrolled in English-language classes.

**Have you ever attended English-language classes?**

*Asked only of respondents who speak little or no English*

CHART 21

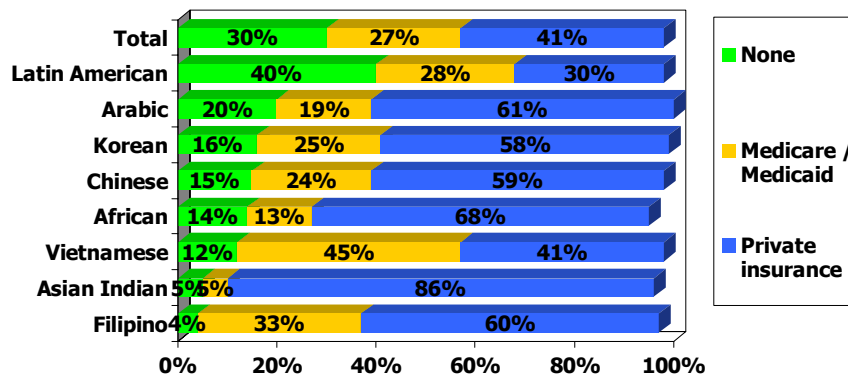


**3. Access to quality health care for their families is a problem that affects a substantial percentage of immigrant women.**

Even though the United States is recognized as having one of the most advanced health care systems in the world, millions of families have little or no access to that system. The study reveals that 40 percent of immigrants from Latin American and significant percentages of immigrants from the remaining areas do not have any type of health insurance.

### Health Insurance

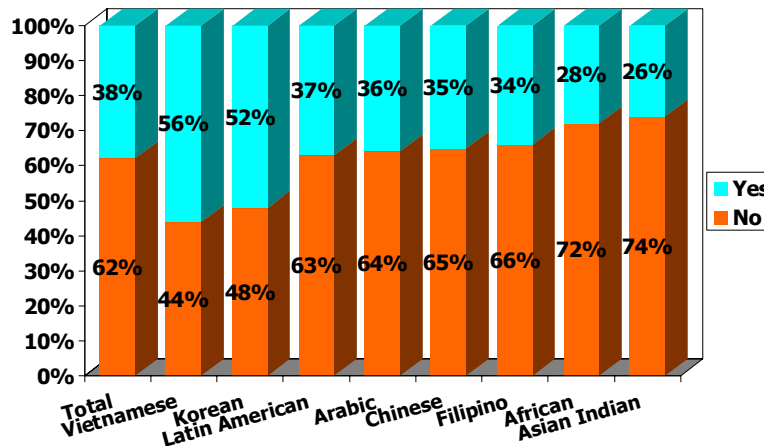
CHART 22



A clear majority of women immigrants who do not have health insurance are not aware of public health programs that could help their children receive medical assistance.

### Are you aware of any programs that could help you and your children receive medical assistance?

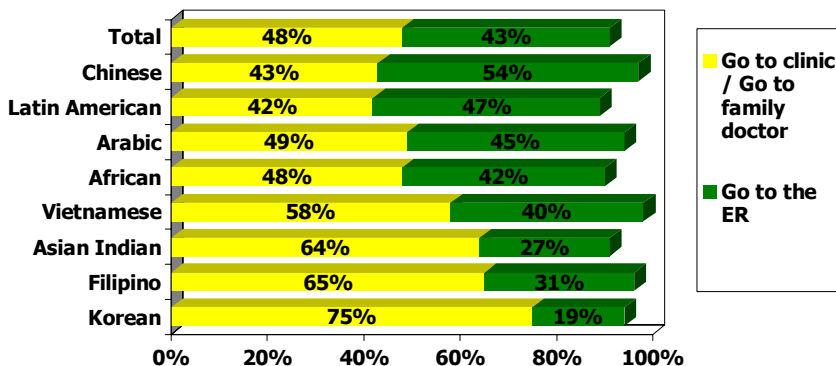
CHART 23



A significant percentage of immigrant women from all continents seek medical treatment at emergency rooms when someone in their family is seriously ill.

### What do you do when you or someone in your family is seriously ill?

CHART 24

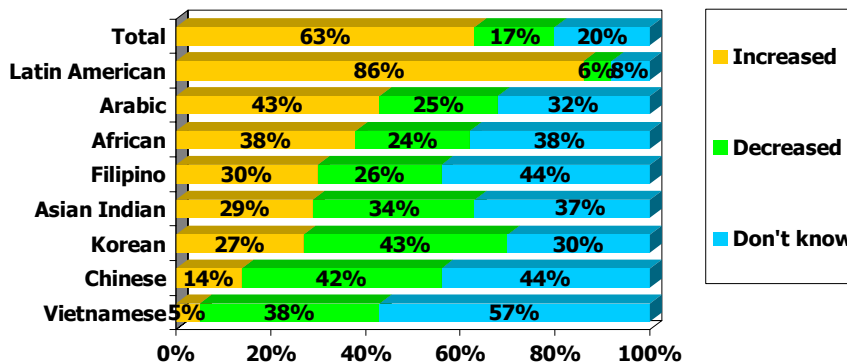


#### 4. While all immigrant women believe discrimination against them is increasing, Latin American immigrants face the highest levels of ethnic discrimination.

Immigrant women from all continents believe that discrimination against them has increased since they arrived in the United States.

### Has discrimination against immigrants in the U.S. increased or decreased since you first came to this country?

CHART 25

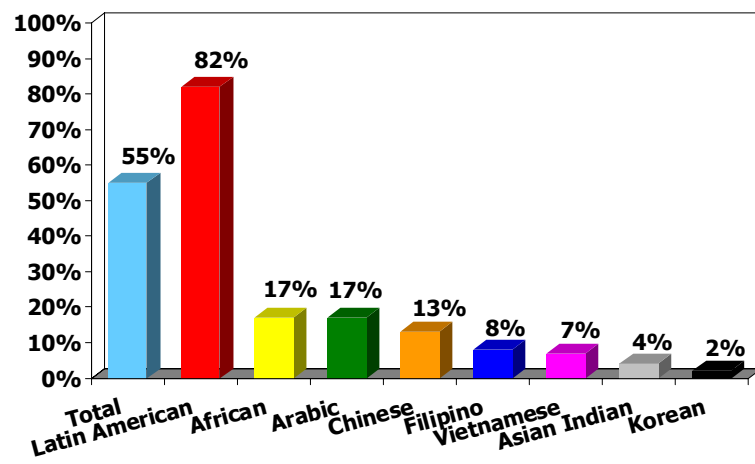


A substantial majority of Latin American immigrant women believe that discrimination is a major problem in the United States. It is no coincidence that this group of women has experienced the greatest number of immigration raids in their communities.

Do you consider discrimination against immigrants in the U.S. to be a major problem for your family, a minor problem, or not a problem for your family?

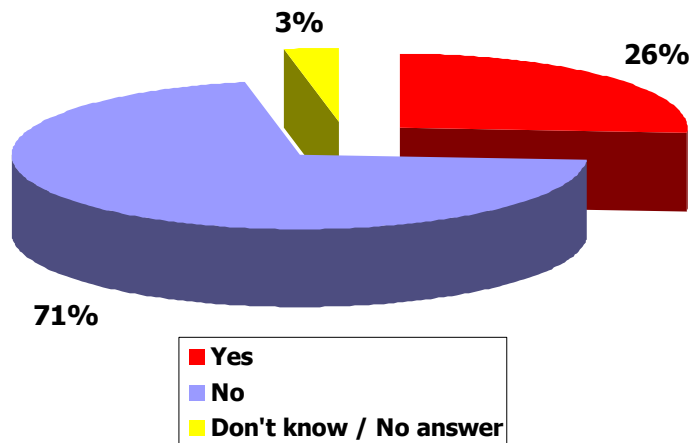
*"A major problem" answers only*

CHART 26



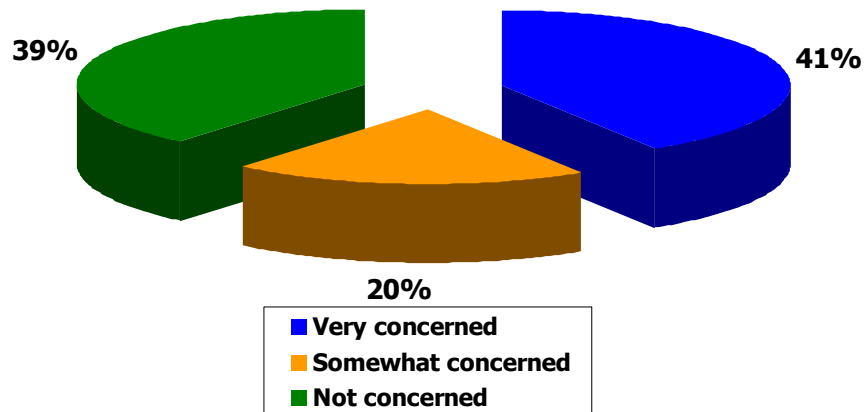
Have there been any raids by the immigration authorities in your community in the last year?  
*Latin American immigrants*

CHART 27



How concerned are you that a raid by immigration authorities in your community could directly impact you and your loved ones?  
*Latin American immigrants*

CHART 28



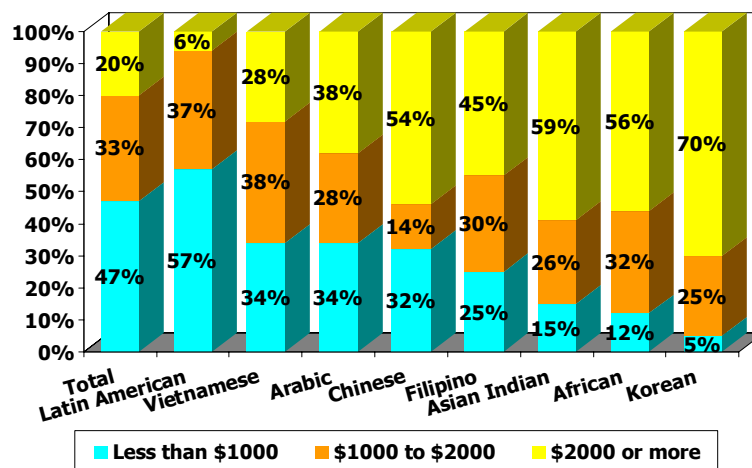
## E. PRIVATE LIFE: CHANGING THEMSELVES TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE IN AMERICA

### 1. Immigrant Women Demonstrate Upward Professional and Economic Movement

Despite initially working for very low wages, immigrant women report that the salary of their current job is more than double that of their first job in the United States. The majority of immigrant women from Korea, India, Africa, and China currently earn over \$2,000 per month, an impressive salary increase, especially given the host of obstacles they overcame in order to achieve it. Latin American immigrant women have not done as well, although most of them now make more than \$1,000 per month.

### How much money do you earn monthly at your current job?

CHART 29

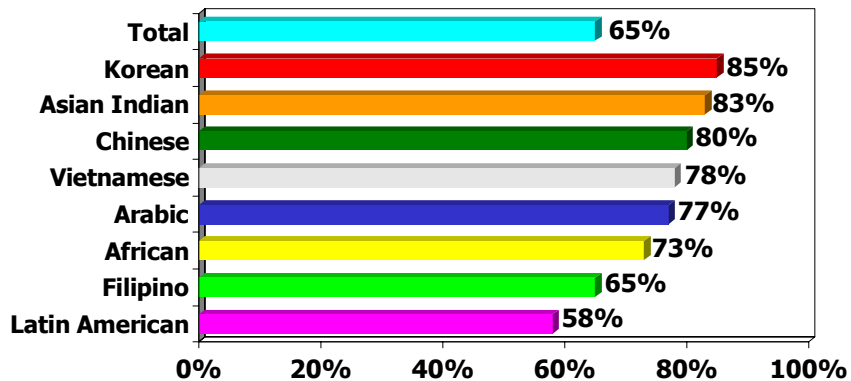


**2. Immigrant Women Successfully Keep their Families Intact**

It is clear from the survey that immigrant women have succeeded in keeping their families together. There are fewer fractured families as a consequence of immigration than conventional wisdom would predict. The great majority of immigrant women are married and more than 90 percent of them live with their husbands. The survey reveals that relatively few women were forced to leave their children behind when they immigrated to the United States. These findings are significant because they dispel the notion that immigration is breaking up families.

Are you currently married, single, divorced, or a widow?  
*"Married" responses only*

CHART 30

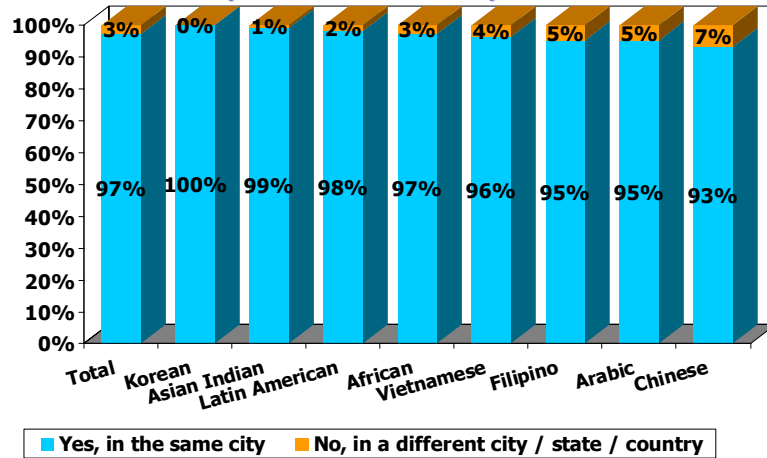




## Does your husband live with you and your family?

*Asked only of married respondents*

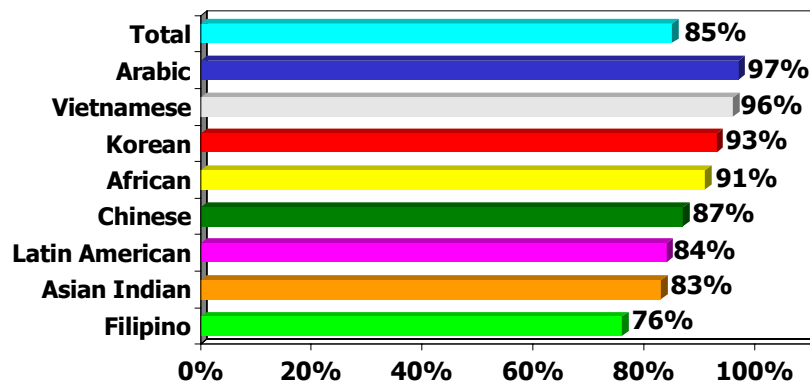
CHART 31



## How many of your children under 18 years of age remained behind in your home country when you came to the U.S.?

*"None" responses only*

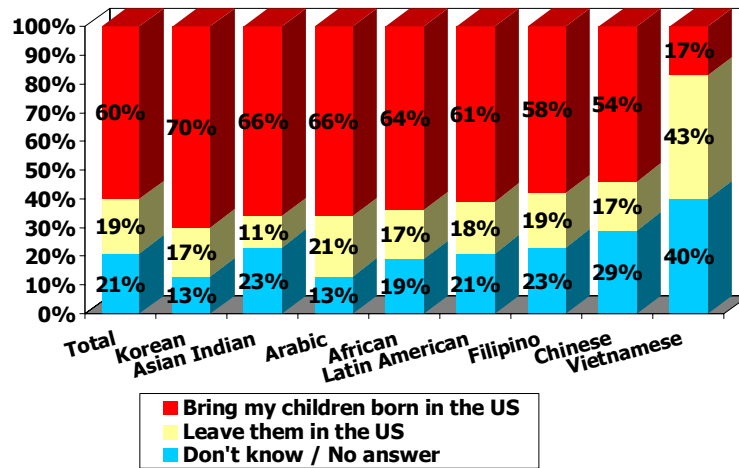
CHART 32



If forced to leave the United States, most immigrant women would take all of their children back to their home country – even those who were born in the United States.

If you were forced to return to your home country by the U.S. government, would you bring your children born in the U.S. with you or would you leave them in this country?

CHART 33

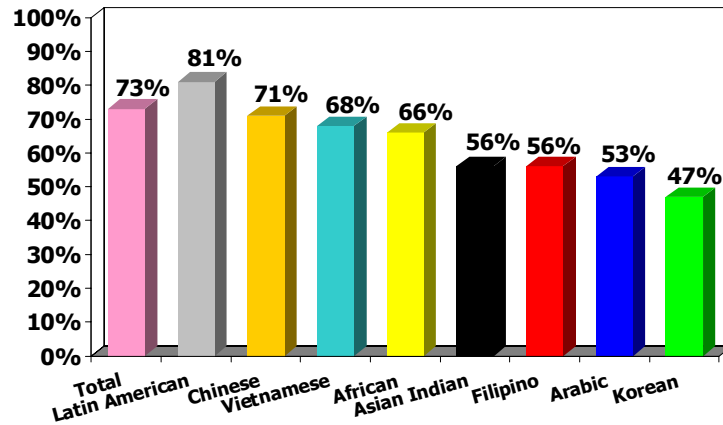


**3. Immigrant Women Assume New Roles and Responsibilities in the United States**

Upon coming to the United States, immigrant women become increasingly independent, seeking new roles and rights. They report being more assertive, both at home and in public, than in their home country. Their newfound economic independence alters traditional patterns of authority in the families. Women immigrants report that they are increasingly assuming the role of heading their households.

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
I have become more assertive at home and in public since I came to the United States.*  
*"Agree" answers only*

CHART 34



Were you the head of your household in your home country, or was your husband the head of household, or was it someone else?

CHART 35

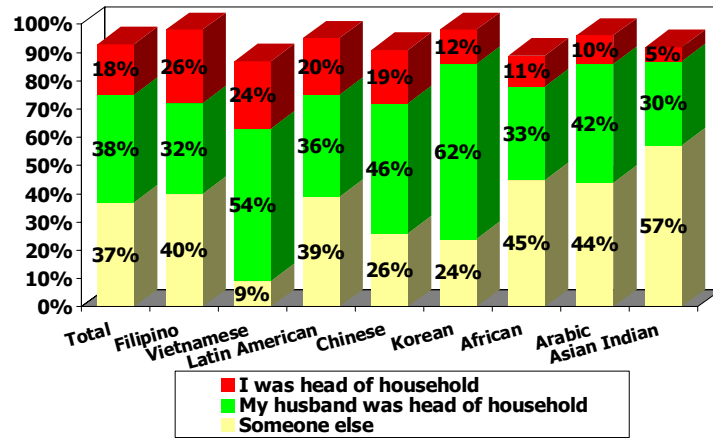
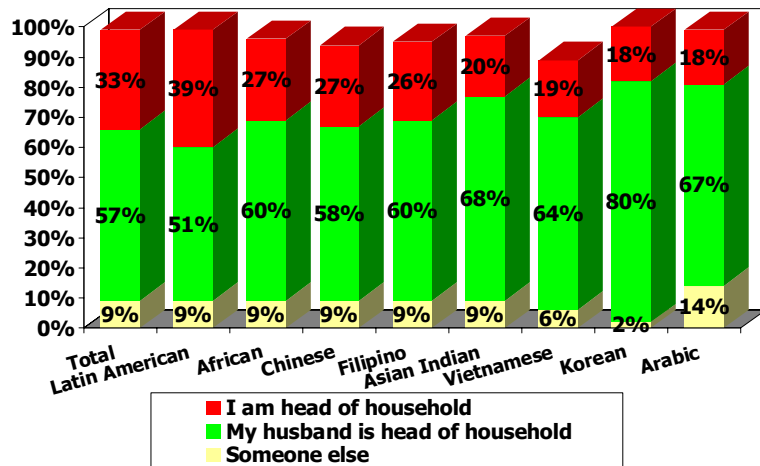


CHART 36

Are you the head of your household in the United States or is your husband the head of household or is it someone else?



### Head of Household

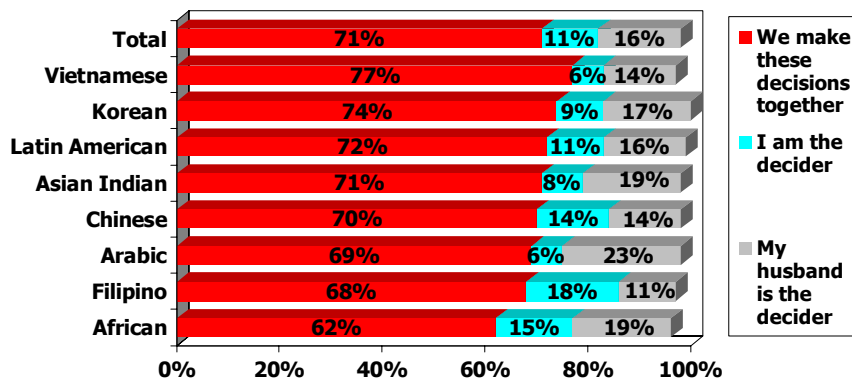
CHART 37

	I <b>WAS</b> the head of household	I <b>AM</b> the head of household
Total	18%	33%
Latin American	20%	39%
African	11%	27%
Chinese	19%	27%
Filipino	26%	26%
Asian Indian	5%	20%
Vietnamese	24%	19%
Arabic	10%	18%
Korean	12%	18%

Immigrant women are also finding more common ground with their husbands, creating homes where responsibilities and decision-making are shared more equitably than in the past. These shared responsibilities include making family financial decisions, solving sensitive and personal family issues, and deciding on the size of their families.

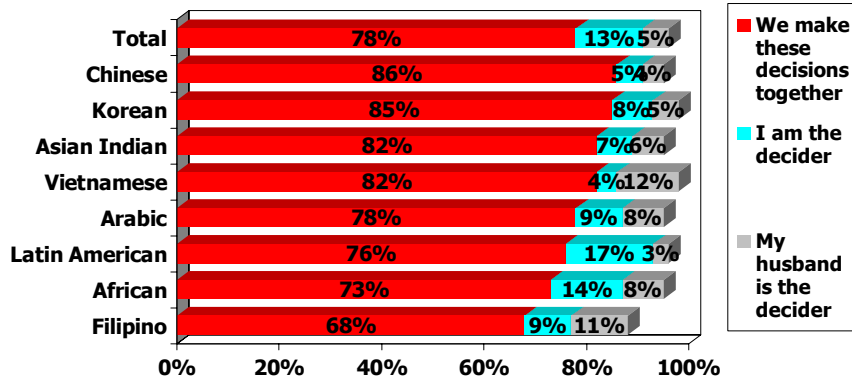
### Who decides about the finances of the family?

CHART 38



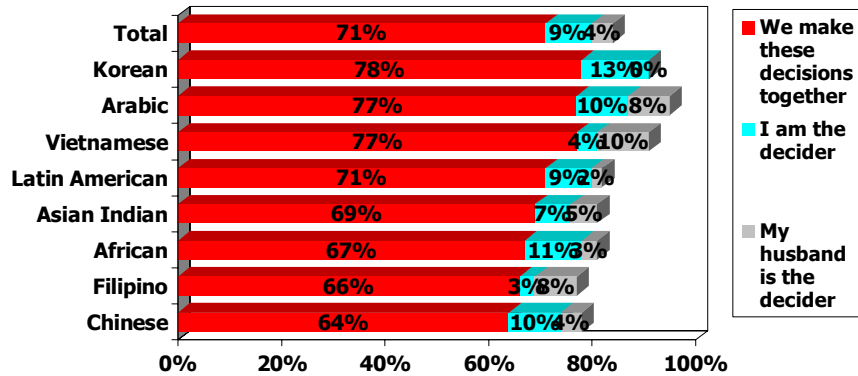
### Who decides about the size of your family?

CHART 39



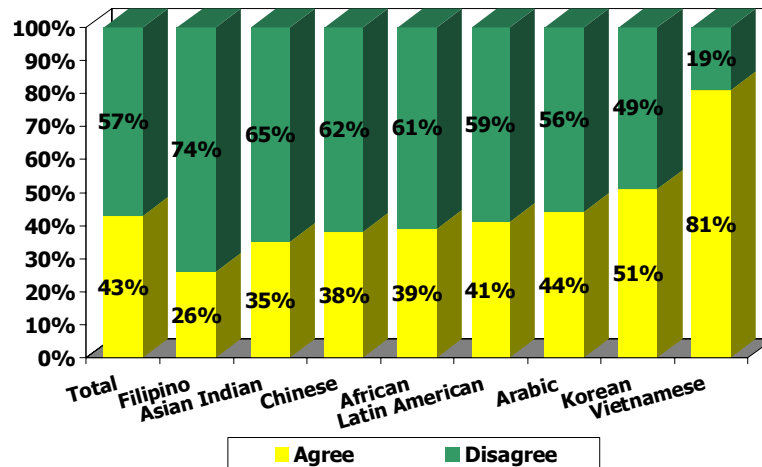
### Who decides about very sensitive and personal family issues?

CHART 40



*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
Many of my responsibilities in the U.S. are usually handled by men in my home country.*

CHART 41



## F. PRIVATE LIFE: ADVOCATING FOR U.S. CITIZENSHIP

Immigrant women may very well be the catalysts for their families becoming citizens of the United States.

Would you like to become a citizen of the U.S. in the future or would you prefer to remain a citizen of your home country?

CHART 42

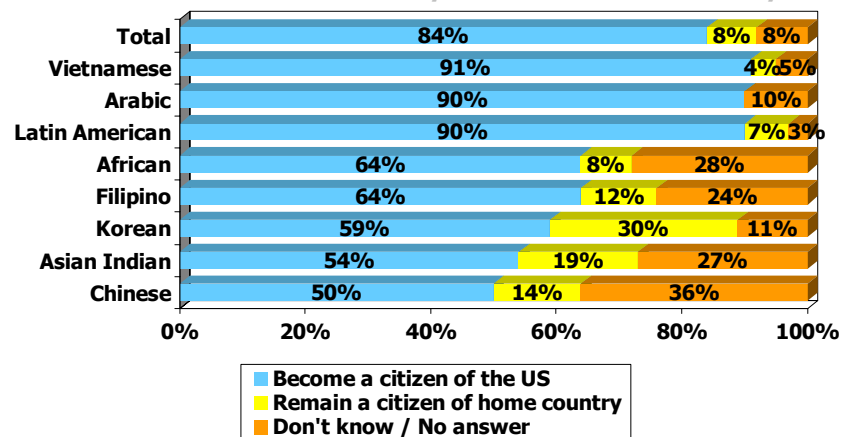


CHART 43

Would you say that you are the one in your family that feels the strongest about becoming a citizen or is it someone else in your family that feels the strongest about becoming a citizen?

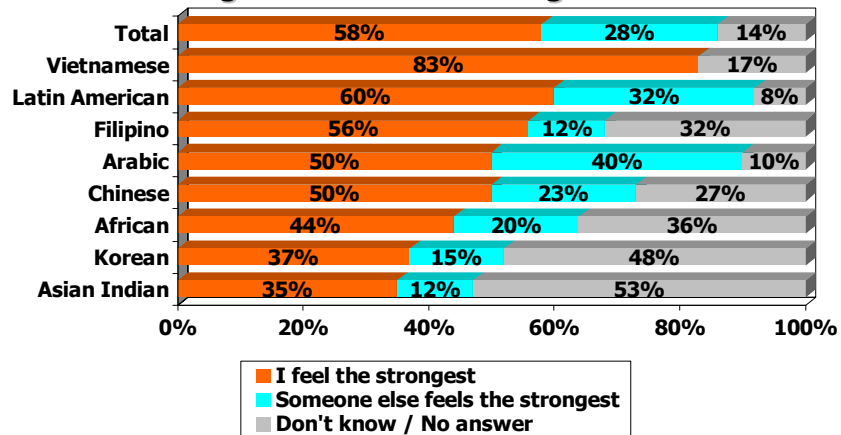


CHART 44

What is the main reason that you plan to become a citizen of the United States?

	Total	Vietnamese	Chinese	Arabic	Asian Indian	Korean	Latin American	African	Filipino
To be able to live in US for the rest of my life	16%	57%	32%	30%	23%	22%	13%	8%	20%
To make sure I'm never separated from my children	24%	22%	23%	20%	8%	7%	27%	16%	0%
To get a better job and make more money	11%	4%	5%	20%	12%	0%	12%	16%	12%
To avoid problems with government	13%	4%	0%	0%	4%	15%	15%	16%	8%
To make sure I'm never deported	4%	0%	0%	10%	4%	0%	5%	0%	0%
To be able to vote in American elections	21%	4%	14%	10%	15%	15%	23%	12%	24%