

# **The Great Equalizer? Education, Gendered Social Ties, and the Occupational Attainment of Employment Visa Holders**

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*This paper revisits conventional knowledge about gender differences in occupational attainment in the context of highly skilled legal migration to the United States. Drawing on a unique combination of nationally-representative survey data on over 1,000 lawful permanent residents and in-depth interviews with 43 immigrants, we find that a U.S. education has a large premium in the global labor market, and it has the power to mitigate the gender gap in occupational attainment among highly skilled legal immigrants in the United States. Gendered migrant alumni networks help explain the equalizing function of a U.S. education for women. By demonstrating aggregate occupational patterns among a nationally-representative sample of permanent residents, as well as an in-depth understanding of the process of occupational attainment, this article suggests that gendered social ties help explain the mobility-generating function of a U.S. education, particularly for highly skilled immigrant women in the labor market.*

Keywords: Labor migration; employment visa; labor market attainment; gendered social ties

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## **Introduction**

The gender gap in careers and earnings between men and women has long been a touchstone in research on occupational inequality. Men earn more than women, hold more prestigious occupations, and are more likely to be employed in management and leadership roles (England 2010; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Clawson and Gerstel 2014; Quadlin 2018). These gaps have been persistent across time, and in some cases, are growing. As legal immigrants make up an increasing share of the skilled workforce in the United States, it is important to reexamine the occupational gender gap in the context of legal migration to the U.S. (Singer 2012; Costa and Rosenbaum 2017).

Immigration laws influence the composition of the skilled workforce through a key class of admission: the employer visa. The employer visa program is the largest program shaping the recruitment and retention of skilled foreign workers, a large and growing share of the overall labor force (Bound et al. 2015; Kerr et al. 2016). However, the legal status category this class of admission creates is not just administrative; it often shapes immigrants' career trajectories and earnings and satisfaction at work (Akresh 2006, 2008; Kreisberg 2019; Lowell 2000; Zeng and Xie 2004; Banerjee 2012). One way in which the employment visa category might shape labor market trajectories is through the institution of higher education. Some immigrants who ultimately migrate through the employer class of admission earned their Bachelor's degrees abroad, while others went to college in the United States (Wildavsky 2010). Previous research suggests that immigrants with foreign degrees are at a disadvantage in wages compared to foreign-born U.S. degree holders in the U.S. labor market (Zeng and Xie 2004). Yet it is unclear whether and to what extent gender differences in occupational attainment exist among

immigrants across educational location. With an eye toward the legal landscape of skilled migration, this paper examines three questions: (1) Is there a premium to a U.S. relative to a foreign education in the highly skilled labor market? (2) Does this premium vary by gender? and (3) What mechanisms help explain this relationship?

To answer these questions, we analyze a unique combination of quantitative and qualitative data. We first use nationally-representative survey data of immigrants who received lawful permanent residence through the employment class of admission to examine inequality in occupational attainment between immigrant men and women holding U.S. and foreign education. To examine the mechanisms contributing to this gap, we rely on in-depth interview data with 43 skilled legal migrants holding a temporary employment visa to unpack the role of credentials, social networks and cultural frameworks developed during the course of a U.S. versus foreign education<sup>1</sup> (Bills, Di Stasio and Gerxhani 2017).

Our nationally-representative data suggest that immigrants who received education inside the U.S. have a large premium in the global labor market relative to migrants who were only educated abroad. In addition, a U.S. education has the power to mitigate the gender gap in immigrants' occupational attainment. Our qualitative data illustrate the process by which a U.S. education helps mitigate gender differences. We find that the social and cultural capital developed in college through gendered migrant alumni networks and strategies for navigating the workplace as women help explain the equalizing function of a U.S. education for women. Beyond evaluating supply and demand, we illustrate how immigration laws, educational

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity and ease of comparison, this paper focuses on Bachelor's degree programs. We expect that Master's degree programs might produce different results, as students are often older and already have a baseline of cultural frameworks and experiences developed in their undergraduate years. We hope to do a comparison between degree levels in a future research project.

institutions, and gender intersect to shape the occupational attainment and experiences of a large and growing share of the U.S. labor market.

## **Literature Review**

### **Education and gender as dimensions of labor market stratification**

The positive relationship between education and socioeconomic attainment has been well-documented; education likely affects occupational attainment through a combination of the human, social, or cultural capital resources developed through schooling (Lucas 2001, Gerber & Cheung 2008; Torche 2011; Bills, Di Stasio and Gerxhani 2017). Researchers of human capital focus on educational credentials, which are key factors that elite employers use in filtering resumes (Rivera 2011). Scholarship on social capital dynamics emphasizes the importance of social networks and informal recruitment in the school-to-work transition process (Granovetter 1995; Marsden & Gorman 2001; Lin 2001; Fernandez and Galperin 2014). Finally, cultural capital factors play a key role in hiring and promotion outcomes: employers display a strong preference for resource-intensive extra-curricular activities that echo white upper middle-class culture, and graduates of elite universities often develop preferences for high-status jobs in prestigious fields (Rivera 2011; Binder, Davis and Bloom 2016).

This positive relationship between education and socioeconomic attainment is often mitigated by gender. While women's educational attainment has outpaced that of men, a gender gap in wages and occupational prestige persists, and the trend toward convergence has stalled (Morris and Western 1999; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Cha and Weeden 2014; Quadlin 2018). Women are often concentrated in lower-prestige occupations, with poor women and women of color underpaid and overworked in the service sector (England 2010; Haveman and Beresford 2012; Clawson and Gerstel 2014; Williams, Kilanski and Muller 2014). As women enter high-

status fields like medicine, the profession often becomes “feminized” and loses some of its prestige (Boulis and Jacobs 2008). Even when women become employed in high-wage, upwardly mobile work, employers often pass up women for promotions, higher salaries, and leadership positions as employers’ gendered assumptions about women’s skill interact with gendered scripts about women’s assertiveness, competence, management styles, and commitment (Acker 1990; Nakano Glenn 1992; Hossfeld 1994; Reskin 2003; Yancey Martin 2003; Kalev 2009; Williams, Muller and Kilanski 2012; Rivera and Tilcsik 2016; Quadlin 2018).

### **Gender and education in the global labor and education markets**

While we know a great deal about gender disparities in the labor market value of a college education, we know less about how this inequality plays out in the school-to-work experiences of highly skilled legal immigrants, and how this process is mitigated and mediated by immigration policies (Kato and Sparber 2013; Orrenius, Peri and Zavodny 2013; Shih 2016). The dynamics of global labor market integration for immigrant men and women are largely driven by forces of supply, demand, and recruitment, but the entire global labor market is shaped by national-level immigration policies that enable and constrain global labor migration. In terms of labor market stratification, the dynamics of education and gender discussed above are all further refracted across dimensions of legal status and the ways that employers can leverage control over workers (Banerjee 2012). This paper positions the discussion of educational and gender inequality in the macro-level context of the legal landscape of immigration policy and examines one key class of admission that shapes the inflow of skilled migrants in the United States: employer-sponsored work visas.

Like their native-born peers, educated and male immigrants receive higher salaries in higher-prestige jobs relative to lower-educated and female immigrants, respectively (Lowell

2000; Batalova 2006; Espiritu 1997). However, unlike for U.S.-born workers, the relationship between immigrants' education and occupational attainment depends on where the education was received (Zeng and Xie 2004; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Altbach and Knight 2007; Wadhwa et al. 2009; Wildavsky 2010). When it comes to earnings, a foreign degree is less valuable in the U.S. labor market than education acquired in the United States, controlling for race and nativity (Zeng and Xie 2004). In the United States, foreign degrees, even from the most prestigious international universities, are often undervalued or not recognized by potential employers (Chiswick 2011; Lesky 2011; McDonald et al. 2011). Further, specific fields require occupational licensing and professional qualifications from the country where an individual is practicing. For example, fields like law and medicine in the United States require a certification from an American board and do not recognize foreign licenses (Wildavsky 2010). This growing literature demonstrates that U.S. credentials far outweigh a foreign credentials in the U.S. labor market. However, it is unclear how any premium or penalty on educational location varies by gender, particularly for highly skilled legal migrants.

Does a U.S. education have the power to mitigate known gender disparities in occupational attainment? This paper examines differences between U.S. and foreign degree holders to unpack the impact of a foreign education on labor market attainment for highly skilled employment-visa holding immigrants to the U.S. We go beyond analyzing credentials to examine the human, social and cultural capital dimensions of a foreign education on men and women's occupational attainment (Bills, Di Stasio and Gerxhani 2017). Given the powerful effects of a U.S. educated demonstrated in previous research, we expect to find a premium of a U.S. degree in occupational prestige. Because previous work has illustrated that gender roles and

expectations operate differently for men and women at work, and the gap in earnings and leadership positions is persistent, we expect the effect of place of education to vary by gender.

With respect to social capital, we expect a U.S. college experience to play a crucial role in expanding and deepening U.S. degree holders' networks in the United States. Previous research shows that dense alumni networks play an important role in finding a job, and we expect this effect to be even stronger among for immigrants whose networks are based in the United States versus abroad (Erickson 1995; Obukhova and Lan 2013; Lutter 2015). Further, migrant social networks have differential effects for men and women, with networks having a stronger impact on internal migration for women versus men, with respect to the initial migration and subsequent social support (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003). With respect to cultural capital, previous research shows that women in white-collar professions who have mentors to teach them strategies about navigating the workforce fare better in career advancement and negotiations, and thus we expect women with U.S. degrees, who have access to professional support groups, to do better (Ragins and Cotton 1999; Tharenou 2005).

## **Methods**

This paper draws on a unique combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis from employment visa holders the United States. First, to examine the relationship between a U.S. versus a foreign education on occupational attainment for men relative to women, we analyze data from the New Immigrant survey, a nationally-representative survey of lawful permanent residents who received green cards through the employment preference class of admission in 2003. Second, to examine the social and cultural mechanisms that explain the relationship between education and occupational attainment, we analyze data from 43 skilled immigrants with temporary employment visas (a visa from which the largest share of

employment preference migrants originate) who hold Bachelor's degrees from U.S. and foreign universities. Pairing macro-level quantitative data with in-depth interviews allows us to explore the mechanisms underlying the statistical patterns that cannot be explained with survey data (Axinn and Pearce 2006). This unique combination of data enables us to achieve both breadth and depth in our analysis. All interview respondents in this sample are Indian-born skilled migrants holding H-1B visas. The H-1B visa program is the largest employer-sponsored work visa program in the United States, and Indians make up three fourths of H-1B visa holders (USICS 2018).

Global labor market dynamics are largely shaped by immigration policy. Declines in the availability of high-skilled visas can discourage skilled migrants from seeking work in the United States or moving for study (Kato and Sparber 2013; Orrenius, Peri and Zavodny 2013; Shih 2016). In the United States, large firms seem to dominate the demand for skilled migrant visas, and subcontracting companies are playing an increasingly large role in matching skilled workers to employers (Kerr, Kerr and Lincoln 2015; Hira 2016). Of the top ten H-1B employers in 2017, five were high-tech employment services headquartered in India (USCIS 2018).

### ***New Immigrant Survey Data and Empirical Approach***

#### ***Data***

The first half of the analysis draws on data from the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), a publicly available, nationally-representative (n=8,573), longitudinal survey of immigrants aged 18 and older who received lawful permanent residence (LPR), otherwise known as a “green card,” as a new arrival or an adjustee in 2003. Data were collected through in-person and telephone interviews in 15 different languages.



From the original sample of 8,573 respondents, we restrict analyses to respondents to those employed in wave one, 2003, immediately after receiving a green card. We then restrict respondents to those who received green cards through the employment preference, a visa program typically reserved for highly skilled workers or professionals with advanced degrees (N=1,264). Skilled migration policies across the world are becoming increasingly focused on employer-sponsored visa programs, which link a migrant's work visa directly to their employer (Menz 2013; Kerr, Kerr and Lincoln 2015; Kerr et al. 2016). In 2003, among those with an employer preference, a large share migrated directly with a high-skilled permanent employment visa, known as an E visa (40 percent), another large share originally had temporary high-skilled worker visas, such as the H-1B visa (40 percent), and the remainder had other temporary visas, including student and family visas.

We use chained multiple imputation techniques to statistically fill in missing values on both independent and dependent variables based on theoretically relevant predictor variables (Allison 2002).

### *Measures*

*Occupational attainment.* We test for unequal distributions in occupational attainment to determine whether educational attainment explains variation in the status of employment. Occupational attainment is a key indicator of human welfare, family health and organization, and intergenerational mobility (Kalleberg 2011). We measure occupational prestige with the occupational prestige score, called the Socioeconomic Index (Duncan 1961), ranging from 1 to 100. Although occupational attainment indirectly captures the average income and education for each occupation, it is important to note this is not a reliable measure of either education or earnings. Despite this limitation, occupational attainment is an important holistic measure of the

overall status of an individual's employment, which often mediates career mobility and asset accumulation.

*Education location.* We include a continuous variable for years of education received outside the United States, and a dichotomous variable for whether any education was received inside the United States.

*Human capital, social capital, and U.S. exposure.* We account for several measures of human capital, including: pre-migration occupational prestige, which we operationalize with a continuous variable (0 indicating unemployed, and 1 indicating lowest up to 100 indicating highest position); childhood income, measured with a survey question that asks whether the respondent's family's income was below, average, or above average compared to other households when the respondent was 16; and childhood rural environment, measured with a survey question that asks whether the respondent lived in a rural area at age 10; and English language linguistic incorporation, measured with a four-point likert scale question asking whether the respondent speaks English very well, well, not well, or not at all. Because home-country investments affect U.S. and transnational occupational attainment (Glick-Schiller 1999), we include a measure of whether respondents gave money or time to social groups before migrating. We include one additional measure of social capital: because some migrants often find employment through family ties (Jasso 2011; Motomura 2006; Waters 1994), we include a measure of whether a relative helped find the respondent's U.S. job. Finally, we include a measure of U.S. exposure: how many years lived in the United States.

*Other controls.* Demographic factors include age, marital status, and whether the respondent has children. We also include U.S. region, including Northeast, Southeast, West, and Midwest. Finally, we include several occupational quality controls, including the number of

years lived in the U.S., the number of hours worked per week and whether the respondent is currently looking for a job.

### *Empirical Strategy*

Following descriptive statistics stratified by gender, we run two regression models on a sample of residents who received lawful permanent residence through the E class of admission: highly skilled professionals who ultimately receive permanent employment visas and then green cards. Both models are descriptive in nature, capturing broad occupational trends between men and women immediately after attaining lawful permanent residence. The first model is an Ordinary Least Squares regression model regressing occupational attainment on educational attainment and location, gender, as well as the human, social capital, exposure measure, and occupational and demographic controls (as mentioned above). This main effect model should help to quantify the value of a U.S. education as well as any occupational disparities by gender. The second regression model is also an Ordinary Least Squares regression model regressing occupational attainment on an interaction between educational location and gender.<sup>2</sup> This interacted model should help to determine whether the value of a U.S. education is moderated by gender.

### *Interview Data and Empirical Approach*

#### *Data*

To examine the mechanisms underlying the relationship between education and occupational attainment differently for men and women, we take advantage of qualitative data collected with Indian H-1B visa holders, the temporary visa holder from which the largest share of E class admits originate. Specifically, we conduct 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews: 33

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<sup>2</sup> We also ran a fully interacted model between each variable and gender. Results are consistent across interaction models (available upon request).

with H-1B migrants from India, and 10 with immigration lawyers, drawn from a larger set of 48 interviews.<sup>3 4</sup> All H-1B respondents in the sample work for private companies and held an H-1B visa in the past year. We supplement these data with interviews with immigration lawyers, who provided a more holistic view of the process and the common stumbling blocks that prevent some potential H-1B migrants from getting a visa.

### *Measures*

Interview questions covered a range of topics related to the job search process, employment satisfaction, and respondents' sense of belonging in the United States. Subjects were recruited through LinkedIn groups for H-1B migrants, as well as through alumni networks from public and private colleges and universities. From these diverse starting points, we supplemented recruitment through snowball sampling. While this sample is limited in size and was not randomly selected, there were many distinct points of entry and thus initial respondents had a limited impact on the selection of subsequent interviewees. About three quarters of potential respondents contacted for this study agreed to participate; others said they were not interested in being interviewed or did not respond. Interviews, which were conducted between spring and fall of 2016, were conducted in person, and by Skype or telephone when the distance

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<sup>3</sup> An additional ten interviews were conducted with H-1B holders from other countries that were not included in this study; while experiences on the H-1B were remarkably similar, future plans varied significantly depending on political and economic context of respondents' home countries and thus I restricted my sample to a single country context. Further, this paper focuses on Indian citizens because they make up the vast majority of H-1B migrants. While the responses in this paper may not be generalizable to H-1B holders from other countries (Indians, for example, benefit from pre-migration characteristics like English-language skills) I control on country of origin in order to dig deeper into the dynamics of reference groups and potential emigration plans.

<sup>4</sup> Further, five more interviews were conducted with individuals who applied for the H-1B visa but were not randomly selected in the lottery, to get a sense of the similarities and differences of characteristics and experiences between migrants who were and were not randomly chosen. Because this paper focuses on the experience of H-1B migrants, these interviews are not included in the analysis.

was too great to travel (for example, respondents living in India were contacted via Skype). Interviews lasted between thirty-five minutes and an hour and forty two minutes, with an average length of fifty-three minutes. Some respondents were contacted for follow-up interviews to clarify and further develop certain points.

### *Sample Characteristics and Empirical Strategy*

Of the 33 H-1B migrants interviewed, 13 respondents in the sample are women and 20 are men. They ranged in age from 23 to 32 years old, with a median age of 28. Respondents varied in their time living in the U.S., ranging from three to eight years, with a median of five years living in the U.S. The median years on an H-1B visa is three, with a range of one to eight.<sup>5</sup> The majority of respondents (N=28) are currently living in the U.S.; five held H-1B visas but returned to India before their visa expired to pursue employment opportunities back in India.

Twelve respondents are foreign educated, with degrees from Indian universities; 21 respondents earned a degree in the U.S. Among these 21 respondents, 11 earned their undergraduate degree in the U.S.; ten went to college in India and earned a Master's degree in the U.S. We define any respondent who earned any degree in the U.S. (Bachelor's, Master's or doctorate) as U.S.-educated, because of the weight U.S. credentials carry in the labor market.<sup>6</sup> To control for institutional quality, all respondents attended top-ranked institutions in the *U.S. News and World Report* top 10 in either the U.S. or India. As previously noted, place of education and class of admission are closely related categories, but not perfectly correlated. All of the respondents in this study who were directly recruited to the U.S. earned their Bachelor's degrees

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<sup>5</sup> The H-1B is a six-year visa, but once an applicant begins the green card process, their H-1B visa can be extended while the paperwork is being processed.

<sup>6</sup> For respondents with mixed educational backgrounds, such as those who have a BA from an Indian University and an MA from a U.S. university, these dynamics might play out slightly differently, but for the purposes of this paper, I explore the effects of all U.S. educational backgrounds together.

in India and had two to five years of work experience in India before transferring to the U.S., but not all Indian-educated H-1B migrants work for subcontracting companies. In this sample, direct recruits tended to be older, because they already had a few years of work experience before moving to the U.S. Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. Names and identifying details have been modified to protect the identities of respondents.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

As Table 1 indicates, men and women have varying occupational attainment upon immediately receiving lawful permanent residence. Men have an average occupational prestige score of 60, while women have a score of 51. Although both men and women have comparable years of education abroad, one-third of men have some education in the U.S., while only one-fourth of women have the same U.S. education. Despite variation in educational location, men and women are comparable in human and social capital, as well as other demographic characteristics. Men have been in the U.S. one year and a half longer than women on average, and they work four hours per week more than women on average.

[Table 1 about here]

### *Main Effects of a U.S. Education and Gender*

We first regress the occupational prestige score (ranging from 1-100) on educational location, gender, and a series of covariates. The results suggest (Table 2) that there is a large and statistically significant premium for a U.S. relative to a non-U.S. education for immigrants of almost nine occupational prestige points. In addition, there is a penalty attached to being a woman in the highly skilled labor market. Specifically, men have five-point higher occupational prestige scores compared to women, all else equal. These results suggest that even among highly

skilled immigrants with comparable education, a U.S. education and being categorically ascribed as “male” yield advantages in the highly skilled labor market.

[Table 2 about here]

#### *Interaction Effect of a U.S. Education and Gender*

To understand whether the U.S. education premium is moderated by gender, we run a second model in which educational location is interacted with gender. Figure 1 presents predicted occupational prestige scores from this interacted model (see Table 3). It shows that a U.S. education has the power to equalize gender inequalities. Men without a U.S. education have occupational prestige scores of 57, while women without a U.S. education have much lower scores of 46. Men *with* a U.S. education, on the other hand, have scores of 66, statistically no different than women’s scores of 64. These results are robust to limiting the sample to H-1B visa workers only (the largest temporary visa entry into the employment preference program), as well as to Indians only (the largest country receiving employment visas). In sum, these results imply that a U.S. education has the power to mitigate existing inequalities between men and women.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Table 3 about here]

#### *Mechanisms: Explaining the Mitigating Potential of a U.S. Education for Women*

The interview data illuminate some of the mechanisms underlying this broad occupational pattern. U.S.-educated respondents of both genders reported significantly higher levels of workplace satisfaction than their Indian-educated peers. U.S. degree holders described a lively and social workplace culture, appreciation for their work hours and pay, and awareness that their American educational credentials held weight in the U.S. labor market. However, there was a gender gap in occupational satisfaction among highly skilled immigrants in the interview

sample. Whereas women often described feelings of frustration and inferiority as they struggled to find opportunities for advancement, male respondents reported higher social status and satisfaction at work. Most women recounted challenges with their male bosses and coworkers and described their workplace as male-dominated; most men emphasized their friendly, cordial relationships with coworkers and attributed any frustrations to their legal status, rather than their gender.

Despite the considerable differences in satisfaction and opportunity that skilled foreign men and women experience in their jobs, interview responses showed that a U.S. education granted women access to alumni and professional networks, which assisted in their adaptation and acculturation. These networks provided women an opportunity to connect with native-born peers and share strategies for navigating male-dominated workplaces. They provided women with emotional support and contributed to their shifting gender ideologies.

### **The power of a U.S. education**

Despite the considerable differences in satisfaction and opportunity that skilled foreign men and women workers experience in their jobs, U.S.-educated respondents of both genders reported significantly higher levels of workplace satisfaction than their Indian-educated peers. Their experiences were shaped by a familiarity and regard for U.S. credentials among employers, the role of alumni and professional networks, and targeted gender-based networks that emphasized mentorship between women.

#### *U.S. credentials*

The powerful effects of U.S. credentials, and a devaluation of foreign degrees, help to explain the premium of a U.S. education illustrated in the quantitative findings. Respondents with foreign degrees described confusion, discomfort and, in some cases, dismissal, of their



educational background. When looking for a new job in the technology sector, Indian-educated respondents often applied to more jobs than their U.S.-educated peers, and received fewer invitations for interviews. This could indicate that the applications of foreign-degree holders are more readily dismissed in the initial review phase.

Even when respondents were invited for an interview for the job, respondents said that interviewers indicated uncertainty around foreign universities. In some cases, employers do not immediately recognize foreign institutions as Bachelor-degree-granting institutions equivalent to U.S. universities. Maya, a software designer who attended one of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), said she had to explain to a potential employer in an interview that she did indeed have the requisite Bachelor's degree.

Last winter I was up for a job at a company I was really, really excited about. I had a great interview, we really connected and I could tell they really liked me. But then they looked over my resume and told me that a BA was required for the position... I was confused, because I had put my college right at the top, and I told them that. But they didn't understand what an IIT was, so I told them it was the best, like the Harvard of Indian universities for engineering. I think they thought I was overselling myself, and it got kind of awkward, like all of the air had left the room... after that, I wasn't surprised when I didn't get the job.

This issue of institutional prestige was common among Indian degree holders, who often found themselves in a position of explaining the quality of their credential in the interview itself.

Mohit, a computer engineer with a BA from a top-ranked Indian university, moved to the United States on an H-1B visa to work for a software company in California, and has been looking for a new job in his field for the last two years. As he described his frustration with his so-far unsuccessful job search, he said that he felt his Indian degree did not carry much weight in the U.S. labor market. "I always get a lot of questions about [my university in India] in job interviews," he said. "They ask what it is – they've never heard of it. It's a really good school, but they don't know it means I'm one of the best." He said that he often tries to explain the

prestige of his college to potential employers, but this strategy often backfires and makes him seem “arrogant,” ultimately leading him to feel insecure and disheartened during the interview.

Where institutional prestige created some counter-productive effects for foreign credentials, U.S.-degree holders, in contrast, said that interviewers often referenced their institution in interviews, making comments about the quality of school. “I’ve come to expect it, when I go for an interview, that the person will say something about what a good school I went to. I used to think it was kind of awkward, but now it gives me a confidence boost,” said Tara, who holds a BA in computer science from an Ivy league school in the U.S. Vinay, who studied finance at another prestigious school in the U.S. said he uses the name recognition as a hook in job interviews. “When [my school] comes up – and it always comes up – I use it as an opportunity to show them what I’ve got... I talk about how much I learned there, and how good I would be at this job... I think they like it because it’s sentimental, but I’m really just showing off.” Respondents also said that recruiters often contacted them directly for job openings, citing their university as a key criterion.

#### *Alumni and professional networks*

A U.S. education is more than just a degree, however – U.S.-educated respondents also experienced a leg up in the job search from the wide U.S.-based alumni networks. While Indian-educated respondents said they felt frustrated and limited in finding new jobs in the U.S., alumni networks played a key role for both U.S.-educated men and women in finding jobs and opened many doors. The networks both provided connections to get their foot in the door, as well as emotional support and an outlet to express frustration once employed.

Indian-educated respondents experienced constraints in their job mobility because of smaller professional networks in the United States; most were directly recruited to the U.S. for

work in their current position, and they had few professional ties outside their current workplace. This made it challenging for some like Lalit to find opportunities elsewhere. He moved to the United States on an H-1B visa three years ago, and has been working for the same financial consultancy firm in New York ever since. “I know I’m supposed to use my connections to get a new job, but the problem is that I don’t have any here. If I did that, I would be back in India, with a new job tomorrow. But here in the states, there’s not much I can do. My American contacts are the two guys with desks next to me...that’s it.” Mohit echoed this experience. “It would be nice to work somewhere else, but I don’t really know where to start...who to ask. Most of the people I know here are from work, so I can’t really talk to them about [leaving],” he said. He eventually used LinkedIn to expand his professional network and contact potential employers directly while he applied for jobs elsewhere, but has so far been unsuccessful and is still working for his original employer.

In contrast, U.S.-educated respondents described large, robust networks that provided support and information about jobs across the country. “A ton of my friends from [school] stayed in the U.S.,” said Abhinav, who studied engineering on the East Coast. “We don’t see each other much, because they live all over the country, but we have group chats and I call them when I want to complain about work...we share information when we see a new job listing and try to help each other out.”

These networks were often made up of a combination of other international students, and U.S. citizens. The ties with U.S. citizens were often slightly tenuous, but extended beyond an individual classmate to their broader U.S.-based network of family members and friends from other parts of their life, emphasizing the “strength of weak ties.” The ties between fellow alumni

immigrants were often quite strong, as friends emphasized a shared experience as foreign workers in the United States, facing constraints with work authorization and legal status.

Ayesha, a U.S.-degree holder, got a job at a startup in Seattle after her classmate notified her about a job posting before it was published on the company's hiring page. She said she felt this gave her an edge over the other applicants, because they could "tell that she was very interested, and knew what was going on with the company." Her classmate coached her through the process, giving her a lot of information about the company and what her future boss was looking for in a potential employee.

Some companies, like Vinay's, incentivized referrals by offering a small bonus to current employees who referred subsequent hires. Though not necessarily targeted to hire immigrant workers, respondents said that these programs encouraged them to reach out to their close friends, mostly fellow international students. Roshan, who studied computer science in the Midwest, said that he helped to get three of his former classmates, all Indian, hired at his company in Silicon Valley. "If I can help another international student get a job, I will. I've done it three times so far, and I just heard about another opening that I'm going to refer one of my friends to. We need to stick together, you know? It's not easy, trying to find a job that will sponsor you."

#### *Mentorship, gendered networks and cultural toolkits.*

These networks and social ties were especially meaningful for U.S.-educated women respondents, who established alumni groups that expanded their professional social network and provided professional mentorship and emotional support. Groups of female friends and alumni organized meet-ups to offer career development, which also served as spaces to air their frustrations as women in male-dominated companies. These organizations exposed them to

strategies for navigating workplace dynamics as women, helping them simultaneously adjust to life in the United States as adults, and U.S. workplace culture. Further, many said these groups introduced them to new ideas and ways of thinking about women's roles that were different than the gender ideology they were raised with in India. These gendered networks were part and parcel of a U.S. education – some alumni groups were borne out of undergraduate clubs to support women engineering and business students, most received institutional support from university alumni offices, and some groups even directly matched undergraduates with an alumni mentor.

These groups often helped women in their initial job search, as they shared information about job postings and connected potential bosses and job candidates. Ridhi used a contact from her university's alumni "women in tech" group to get her first job out of college.

That alumni group made my job search so much easier... I had a friend who graduated a few years before me... we didn't know each other that well, but I emailed her because I saw her name on the alumni list... and she put me in touch with the guy who ended up being my boss. I reached out about a job that looked like a good fit, and within like, a day, she got an interview scheduled for me. It was so fast and made things so much easier and less intimidating, because we already had that connection.

Women often used these groups to share strategies for how to manage the challenges of working in a male-dominated environment. Tara attends a monthly happy hour, where women alumni swap stories and tactics.

We all have these problems, being called bossy or pushy or whatever. It drives us all crazy, but I guess that's what happens when you have a lot of smart women who have good ideas. Men don't know how to deal with it...they're intimidated. We were complaining about it at the happy hour last month, and then people started talking about ways to work around it. How to get credit for your ideas, how to talk in meetings. A lot has changed for me since then.

In addition to exposing women to strategies for navigating workplace dynamics, the groups themselves often introduced respondents to new perspectives on gender that contrasted with the

gender ideology they learned growing up. “Seeing all of these women navigating careers and relationships and life has shown me how much women can do,” said Ayesha. “Growing up, I didn’t know any women who worked, so I didn’t have many role models for the types of jobs women could have...It’s inspiring.”

Another group organized a monthly book club, where they read books related to women’s careers and how to get ahead. The ideas in these books directly influenced women’s gender ideology as well. Maya said that the last book her book club had read was Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, which she said gave her a lot more confidence to assert herself at work to get ahead. The book exposed her to new ways of thinking about gender roles as well. “I guess it never seemed weird to me when I saw a man in charge of a company, but I’m rethinking that now.”

These groups often fostered mentorship that gave women targeted support to handle specific issues. A few groups organized mentorship programs, matching recent graduates with more senior alumni for the first year out of college. Anusha, a consultant with a Bachelor’s degree from a U.S. university in the Midwest, sought guidance from a fellow alumna who graduated a few years before her when she had to figure out how to negotiate her pay.

Having other women to talk to about stuff at work... has given me a lot of confidence. I knew I should be negotiating for a higher salary at work, but I just didn’t know how to do it. So I called up one of my friends who’s a few years older than me and she helped me practice the conversation like four times. It really helped when I actually talked to my boss, and I actually got a higher raise than I thought I would.

The groups also provided space for emotional support, where women could unload their frustrations and recharge. “I always feel so energized after these meet-ups,” said Amrita, who holds a U.S. degree and works for a photo-editing company in the Bay Area. “It reminds me that I’m not alone, and that other women are going through similar things. They’re all so smart and it makes me feel so excited about the work that I do. Like it has meaning.”

“Whenever I get mad at work, whenever some guy is condescending or rude to me, I text our group thread and vent for a minute... it really helps me let off some steam, and then I can deal with the issue with a clear head. My friends get it, because they’re in the same position,” said Karina. “My friends helped me get my job, and they help me get through it every day.”

Indian-educated women respondents, in contrast, said they felt isolated, unable to share their experiences with their male coworkers in the U.S., or fellow alumni from their Indian colleges, who mostly worked in India or elsewhere abroad. “My college network is all over the place,” said Sonita, 24, who attended one of the IIT’s. “My friends from school moved to London and Dubai or stayed in India. So my professional network in the U.S. is all these guys I work with and that’s pretty much it... most of them are fine, but their experience is so different from mine, you know? Maya said that despite working in the same industry, she often struggled to talk to her close female friends from college, because most worked in India and could not relate to her experience working in the U.S.

I don’t really feel like I have anyone to talk to when something comes up at work. I don’t really get along with my boss. I don’t think he likes me that much or thinks I’m that smart... once I confronted him after a meeting where he literally ignored me, and then praised the guy sitting next to me for [repeating] my idea.... Things got pretty heated, and I was pretty upset afterwards. But there wasn’t anyone I could talk to, so I just kept it to myself... I tried to bring it up with my best friend from college, but my friends from school...they don’t really get it because most of them are back home and think I have it so good working in the U.S. They don’t get what it’s like to be a woman working here... how rude and dismissive the guys can be. And I don’t want to talk to my coworkers about it, it’s kind of awkward, and they don’t get it anyway... they’re part of the problem...like how am I going to complain to them about how sexist and rude they are?

In addition to the credential power of a U.S. degree, a U.S. education gave women access to alumni networks that created a space where skilled immigrant women developed cultural toolkits for navigating the U.S. workplace, and absorbed different gender ideologies than those they were raised with. These gendered social ties were rarely enacted for U.S.-educated men,

who often used alumni events as socializing and networking opportunities, but rarely as spaces to share professional strategies.

## **Discussion**

This paper sharpens our understanding of place of education and gender as key dimensions of inequality in the labor market experiences of highly skilled legal migrants. We find that a U.S. education has a large premium in the global labor market, and the social and cultural capital developed in college and after graduation helps U.S.-educated women mitigate the gender gap in immigrant occupational attainment. Gendered migrant alumni networks help explain the equalizing function of a U.S. education for women, as they provided professional support and exposed women to cultural toolkits and strategies for navigating the workplace as women.

Potential employers displayed a strong preference for U.S. universities, while top-ranked Indian universities were often unrecognized, despite their prestige. This puts Rivera's (2011) work on recruiter preference for super-elite institutions in global perspective, and raises further questions about global institutional prestige and inefficiencies in credential transferring and skill matching as higher education becomes increasingly global (Altbach and Knight 2007; Wildavsky 2010; Chiswick 2011; Kalleberg 2011). In examining how social networks and cultural frameworks compound and magnify the effects of a U.S. credential, we find that alumni networks are a crucial site of social and cultural capital development for U.S.-educated women.

All of these dynamics are shaped by the macro-level context of U.S. immigration policy, which regulates, enables and constrains skilled migration to the U.S. This paper focuses on employer-sponsored work visas as a key class of admission that makes up the skilled migrant population in the United States, and finds that variation in educational location among



immigrants through this entry point is associated with widely different outcomes. Specifically, we highlight how and why receiving a U.S. education relative to a foreign education mitigates gender-based labor market inequalities among employment visa holders. This work advances the research on skilled labor migration beyond issues of supply and demand into a deeper understanding of how gendered professional networks, credentials, and immigration laws impact workplace satisfaction and occupational attainment among a large and growing share of the U.S. labor market.

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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Men and Women Highly Skilled Lawful Permanent Residents (N=1,264)**

	Men		Women	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Occupational Attainment	60.10	20.99	50.67	22.84
Educational Location				
Years Education Outside the U.S.	15.63	3.73	15.15	3.38
Any Education Inside the U.S.	0.31	---	0.26	---
Human Capital, Social Capital, and U.S. Exposure				
Pre-Migration Occupational Attainment	32.29	24.80	33.59	27.19
Below Average Childhood Income	0.16	---	0.15	---
Average Childhood Income	0.53	---	0.55	---
Above Average Childhood Income	0.32	---	0.29	---
Lived in Rural Environment as Child	0.27	---	0.33	---
Gave to Social Groups Before U.S.	0.52	---	0.54	---
Relative Helped Find the U.S. Job	0.06	---	0.07	---
Speaks English Not at All	0.02	---	0.02	---
Speaks English Not Well	0.11	---	0.10	---
Speaks English Well	0.32	---	0.34	---
Speaks English Very Well	0.55	---	0.55	---
Years in the U.S.	6.99	4.72	5.40	5.52
Other Controls				
Region of Origin				
Latin America and Caribbean	0.14	---	0.12	---
Africa	0.02	---	0.03	---
South and East Asia	0.61	---	0.69	---
Europe and Central Asia	0.21	---	0.15	---
Middle East	0.02	---	0.01	---
Married	0.85	---	0.67	---
Has Children	0.62	---	0.51	---
Age	37.19	7.52	36.19	8.17
Region in the United States				

Northeast	0.36	---	0.32	---
Midwest	0.19	---	0.20	---
South	0.23	---	0.26	---
West	0.22	---	0.21	---
Hours Worked Per Week	44.23	8.33	40.10	11.26
Looking for a New Job	0.17	---	0.13	---
<hr/>				
N	833		431	
<hr/>				

**Table 2. Occupational Attainment for Highly Skilled Lawful Permanent Residents in 2003 (N=1,264)**

<b>Educational Attainment and Location</b>	
Years Education Outside the U.S.	2.032*** (0.160)
Any Education Inside the U.S.	8.796*** (1.173)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	5.469*** (1.059)
<b>Human Capital</b>	
Pre-Migration Occupational Prestige	0.043* (0.019)
Childhood Income (Below Average Omitted)	
Average Childhood Income	-0.151 (1.381)
Above Average Childhood Income	1.575 (1.512)
Childhood Rural Environment	-2.179* (1.057)
Linguistic Incorporation (Speaks English Not at All Omitted)	
Not Well	8.444* (4.105)
Well	19.053*** (3.942)
Very Well	21.718*** (3.961)
<b>Financial and Social Capital</b>	
Gave to Social Groups Before U.S.	0.610 (0.969)
Relative Helped Find the Job	-3.546+ (2.081)
<b>U.S. Exposure</b>	
Years in the U.S.	0.781*** (0.200)
Years in the U.S. Squared	-0.018** (0.007)
<b>Demographic Characteristics and Occupational Quality</b>	
Region of Origin (Europe Omitted)	
Latin America	-12.257*** (1.860)
Africa	-3.594 (3.174)
Asia	-2.787* (1.299)
Middle East	2.233



	(3.509)
Married	2.831*
	(1.300)
Has Children	-1.685
	(1.187)
Age	0.874*
	(0.425)
Age Squared	-0.010*
	(0.005)
Constant	-30.158**
	(10.263)

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+ p<.10; \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

Notes. Model also controls for U.S. region of the country and measures of occupational quality.

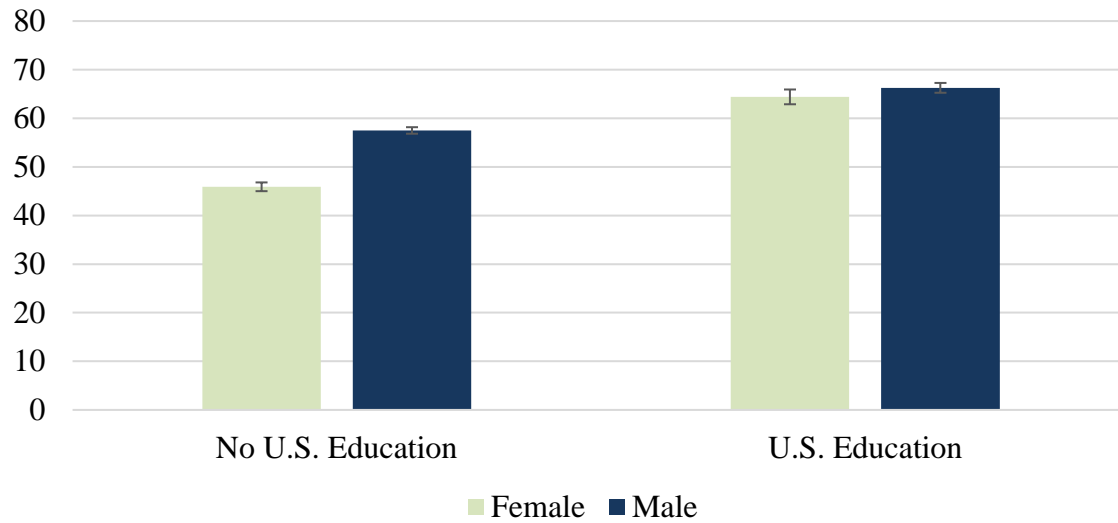
**Table 3. Interacted Model of Occupational Attainment for Highly Skilled Lawful Permanent Residents in 2003 (N=1,264)**

<b>Educational Attainment and Location</b>	
Years Education Outside the U.S.	1.881*** (0.251)
Any Education Inside the U.S.	14.936*** (1.907)
<b>Gender and Education Interactions</b>	
Male	5.146 (4.480)
Male * Education Outside the U.S.	0.186 (0.279)
Male * Education Inside the U.S.	-8.860*** (2.178)
<b>Human Capital</b>	
Pre-Migration Occupational Prestige	0.043* (0.019)
Childhood Income (Below Average Omitted)	
Average Childhood Income	0.045 (1.374)
Above Average Childhood Income	1.776 (1.505)
Childhood Rural Environment	-2.110* (1.051)
Linguistic Incorporation (Speaks English Not at All Omitted)	
Not Well	8.757* (4.093)
Well	19.201*** (3.925)
Very Well	22.038*** (3.955)
<b>Social Capital</b>	
Gave to Social Groups Before U.S.	0.664 (0.966)
Relative Helped Find the Job	-3.551+ (2.063)
<b>U.S. Exposure</b>	
Years in the U.S.	0.706*** (0.200)
Years in the U.S. Squared	-0.015*

	(0.007)
<b>Demographic Characteristics and Occupational Quality</b>	
Region of Origin (Europe Omitted)	
Latin America	-12.110***
	(1.850)
Africa	-3.633
	(3.157)
Asia	-2.715*
	(1.291)
Middle East	2.721
	(3.494)
Married	3.057*
	(1.293)
Has Children	-1.905
	(1.181)
Age	0.881*
	(0.423)
Age Squared	-0.010*
	(0.005)
Region of the U.S. (Northeast Omitted)	
Midwest	2.369+
	(1.309)
South	0.188
	(1.239)
West	-0.084
	(1.367)
Hours Worked per Week	0.194
	(0.154)
Hours Worked per Week Squared	0.001
	(0.002)
Looking for a New Job	-0.617
	(1.275)
Constant	-29.924**
	(10.572)

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+ p<.10; \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001



**Figure 1. Predicted Occupational Attainment for Highly Skilled Men and Women with and without a U.S. Education.**

*Notes.* Error bars are plus/minus the standard error. All other covariates are held at their means.