



OUR AMERICAN IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS
THE WOMEN

By Susan C. Pearce, Elizabeth J. Clifford, and Reena Tandon

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ABOUT SPECIAL REPORTS ON IMMIGRATION

The Immigration Policy Center's *Special Reports* are our most in-depth publication, providing detailed analyses of special topics in U.S. immigration policy.

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INTRODUCTION

When Americans picture an immigrant entrepreneur, they likely imagine a man who began the migration of his family, later bringing his wife over to become a volunteer assistant in the shop. This image is straying farther and farther from reality as more women open their own enterprises. Yet the idea that immigrant women might be the owners and originators of some of our restaurants, motels, Silicon Valley hi-tech firms, local real-estate agencies, or other entrepreneurial ventures has yet to become conventional wisdom.

As awareness of this new reality grows, however, we must credit a number of foremothers. There are numerous examples of women's entrepreneurial start-ups throughout American history, illustrating that entrepreneurial women were right there, actively in the middle of the game, at every stage of the American economy's evolution.¹ These included both the immigrant and the native-born. Historian Barbara Howe has documented the businesses that immigrant women in nineteenth-century West Virginia owned, ranging from boarding houses and groceries to millenary shops, with forays into food and beverage production industries.²

Today, immigrant women entrepreneurs abound in every region of the United States. In fact, the ten states where the most immigrant woman-owned businesses are located include states in each region of the country.³ The top three cities are Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, DC. Several businesses owned by immigrant women are making their way into the lists of top-grossing firms in arenas such as technology.

There was a notable rise in immigrant women's entrepreneurship rates between 2000⁴ and 2010. Immigrant and native-born women's business-ownership rates were roughly equivalent in 2000, at 5 percent of women who were employed for each group. By 2010, according to the American Community Survey, immigrant women's entrepreneurship rates had grown to more than 9 percent, while the native-born women's rate grew to 6.5 percent. Not only had foreign-born women outpaced native-born women, but their rates only trail foreign-born men by less than 4 percentage points.⁵ In 2010, 40 percent of all immigrant business owners were women (1,451,091 immigrant men and 980,575 immigrant women). That same year, 20 percent of all women business owners were foreign-born.⁶

These numbers indicate that there is a quiet revolution of immigrant women's business ownership that is organically growing, but is going relatively unnoticed in the culture at large. The Center for Women's Business Research estimated that business ownership for women of color—both native-born and foreign-born—was increasing at six times the rate of ownership by other demographic groups during the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁷ Eduardo Figueros, a community-oriented specialist who trains Latinos in the Los Angeles region in entrepreneurship to encourage self-empowerment, has noticed these trends firsthand. In 2007, he reported to us that he had been seeing a major growth in the number of women joining his seminars. In addition, Eduardo was noticing something quite new: women were gravitating

toward businesses that have been considered atypical for women in the past. Fewer wanted to open food stands or sell handicrafts than in the past. Crossing the country to the East Coast, similar trends are evident. In a 2009 ethnographic study of Latino shops known as *tiendas* in North Carolina, anthropologist David Griffith echoed this observation of the growing entrance of immigrant women into business ownership. His study documented that as many as half of these businesses were owned by women.⁸

Rachel Owens, cofounder of the Orange County, California, chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), offered her overview of the changes in both native-born and immigrant women's ventures:

"At the beginning, it was middle-aged white women, *all* in the service industries. After sixteen years, it has been a metamorphosis. In the last ten years, the businesses are across the board: manufacturing, detective agencies, lawyers, CPAs, aerospace, machinery, and construction. In the last five years, there has been a definite growth in minority businesses: primarily forty years old and under; many are thirty and under. I believe it's education, access to capital."

What are some of these business owners' stories? We asked women from a range of business sectors in several cities to tell us why and how they started their ventures, what challenges they faced, what their businesses mean to them, and what contributions they are making.

"Everything That Made Me Who I Am Was in Mexico"

First, what led these women to leave their home country? Judith Rodriguez, who owns a home-based day-care center in Houston, first came to the United States in 1979. In recounting her story, she remembered, "When you live in Mexico, and everyone talks about the U.S., in your mind it's the promised land. My country has a lot of poor people. I saw a different way of living when I came here." While in Mexico, she was watching her marriage deteriorate, and her husband was exhibiting signs of abuse. Judith did not

Ana Martinez's Story

Ana Martinez was selling tamales on the corner when she discovered Mama's Hot Tamales Café through its colorful tamale carts. Ana took advantage of the training program, including the kitchen where Mama's incubates new businesses. Like several other immigrant women entrepreneurs we met, she was inspired by her mother and grandmother, who had owned their own stores, in which Ana had helped out as a child. She remembers seeing her mother with an apron full of money, and this made her determined to be her own boss and make her own money. She now has her own catering business, specializing in tamales with Honduran ingredients, with a set of regular clients and reports making eight hundred to one thousand tamales per day.

She explained how she feels: "I'm really happy to be my own boss [and] proud of myself." She was also proud of the tamales, which she characterized as "costing a little more, but they have great ingredients: they are *very fresh*—not frozen." When we met her, she was in the process of buying a house. Her next goal is to start a restaurant; her eyes lit up as she told the story of a Cuban immigrant who started a restaurant with five hundred dollars and now owns a chain of restaurants. But she does not plan to stop there; she also hopes to get her products into supermarkets.

want to watch her children grow up to be like her husband. She realized, “My kids needed me.” This determination drove her to pick up and move her children with her to Chicago to live with a cousin. Judith found the experience to be depressing at first, as she had cut off her own roots; she recalled, “Everything that made me who I am was in Mexico.”

Three entrepreneurs whom we interviewed were refugees who escaped Vietnam, two as a result of the war in the 1960s and 1970s and the other more recently. Another business owner had been living under repressive political conditions in Romania before 1989. More than once, women cited domestic violence. One had dared to initiate a divorce in her home country decades ago. Her decision did not sit well with her relatives. She recalled, “Everyone in my family hated me. There had never been divorce in the family.”

Whereas some of these women escaped trouble, several migrated for the educational opportunities and started businesses after establishing themselves professionally. A few of these women came specifically to set up their business. Although this was not the norm for most of them, it is notable that some entrepreneurial ventures were preplanned, including that of Maria de Lourdes Sobrino, whose story appears here.

Once these women arrived, they set about putting down roots and figuring out how they would survive in their new environment. Some worked low-wage jobs, others earned a college or graduate degree, and a few took training classes. Those who did not speak English juggled these new commitments with English classes. Judith Rodriguez, from Mexico, worked in a child-care center from seven in the morning to five in the evening each day and then studied from five-thirty to ten o’clock at night for her license to open her own center.

Even those with professional training in their home country often found themselves underemployed in the United States. One former teacher found herself cleaning houses after she arrived, and another teacher scrubbed animal kennels and worked as a live-in nanny for some years. This is not uncommon. Rhacel Parreñas’s study of Filipino migrants found that the Philippines faced a teacher shortage, as teachers who emigrated made higher wages as domestic workers in other countries.⁹ A woman with a strong educational background in Mexico who found herself waiting tables in the United States remembered, “The hardest moment was when I got a tip. I cried, because I felt like a beggar. I tried to give it back. They said no, and tears came down.”

“I Didn’t Want to Punch the Clock”

The decision to take the leap and open a business is a risky one, even in the wake of closed or partially blocked doors in other avenues. What made these women decide to embark on such a risk? For the Kelly sisters from Ireland, one motivation was the desire for schedule flexibility. After arriving in Los Angeles, they had each found work in the health-care industry. But they wanted to raise children and spend time with their families. They also missed the lengthier European vacations. Further, they looked around and noticed that it was the insurance brokers who were making the money, and they decided that it would be smart to capitalize on that discovery and become brokers themselves. They began observing brokers and came to a

Quincy Nguyen's Story

This young Vietnamese woman runs her own nail salon in Los Angeles while she simultaneously manages a dental-crown lab and cares for her two small children. Since she fled Vietnam as a teenager without her family, she had to establish herself alone in the United States. She took a job in a nail salon because she was not required to know English to do well at the work. When her boss noticed that she spoke English, however, she insisted on promoting her to manager. That leap to a high level of responsibility, supervising thirty employees and managing all the finances, helped lead to her eventual decision to open her own shop. But Quincy recalls her trepidation at this prospect:

I looked at the newspaper, looked around, found this one, and said, "Okay, let's open, but I'm so scared. I need staff, etcetera" . . . I bought it from another owner, but that owner took all of the employees and all the clients with her! It was tough! I don't know how they can treat people like that.

An American friend of Quincy's has been trying to convince her to partner up and open a second salon, but that was another prospect that frightened Quincy. The friend continues to encourage her though, and she said that when she argues with her friend, "every time I use the 'scared' word, she laughs hard."

realization: "Hey, we're better than them. . . . So we picked up the trade by literally going on appointments with brokers and listening to them going through medical and dental and 401(k) proposals." Today, Anne and Deirdre Kelly cannot stop talking about how happy they are with their flexible schedules. The sisters integrate their commitment to family issues and needs by promoting their business as family friendly for their clients.

A repeated, prominent strand in these women's decision to start their own business was the desire for independence. As one put it, "I don't want to work for anybody. I didn't want to punch the clock." This woman, from Iran, started a hair salon. Others were shocked at the ways they were financially exploited by employers. Previous research has uncovered a pattern of migrants starting businesses to repair their damaged self-esteem from underemployment and exploitation. This was likely true for several of these women. Child-care-center owner Judith remembered how roughly she was treated when she arrived from Mexico: "Every day was getting harder and harder. . . . I said, 'I'm going to swallow it and do what it takes to be here.'" From a supermarket-cashier job, where she was required to memorize the price of every product on the shelves, to poorly paying temporary jobs, to thirteen years of waiting tables in restaurants while she completed her education, Judith was determined to have "something different."

It would be easy to make the assumption that it was the inspiration of independent women in the United States that helped stimulate these women's courage to open their business. Interestingly, however, and more than once, the women reflected on the inspiration that they received from particular women in their family back home who were business owners. They spoke of these women as people they admired for their strength and independence. Vietnamese restaurant owner Trang Ngyuen learned her cooking skills from her mother's restaurant. Health-care business owner Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, from Jamaica, remembered, "I always wanted to start my own business." In Jamaica, she observed her aunt, a successful restaurant owner who raised her during several years of her childhood. Shirley's mother

began a humble clothing business and later became the manager of a large department store. In fact, women's entrepreneurship is traditionally central to a number of cultures—and economies—across the world. One estimate is that African women produce 80 percent of food grown on their continent, Asian women produce 60 percent, and Latin American women produce 40 percent. Many women also sell their produce in the market—and thus are merchants as well as producers.¹⁰

The desire for challenge was also common among these entrepreneurs. Los Angeles resident Denise Davies, a Canadian, ran a school in Pakistan for many years. While in Pakistan, she began collaborating with an entrepreneurial friend to offer consulting services for businesses. As the World Wide Web was taking off in the West, Denise became fascinated with the idea of capitalizing on the potential for the Internet to boost her consulting business. She eventually relocated to Los Angeles to establish her new company.

Frustration and disappointment with the conventional workplace certainly motivated many of these women, but this was not true of all. Several of these women, for example, received their encouragement from supervisors in their workplace to go out on their own. In each of these cases, those supervisors were men. One of these entrepreneurs, Angela Chan, is a woman with a strong work ethic that served her well in her former workplace. Her supervisor realized that she had the ability to run her own company. Angela recalled how little confidence she had early on, as she spoke broken English and was afraid of public speaking. Eventually, she found herself turning a company that was losing money into a profitable one, and the Securities and Exchange Commission interviewed her to learn how she was doing it.

“I Was Invisible to the Banks”: The Quest for Capital

If access to capital is one key to getting a business off the ground, how did these women garner the resources that they needed? They found their resources through various types of capital.¹¹

Economic Capital

Some of these women did not need economic capital to start their business. Ghana-born Esther Armstrong, for example, found herself the guardian of a collection of African clothing left by importers who had brought it for sale. She started selling the clothing in flea markets and eventually set up shop. But most would not have gotten their business off the ground without funds. Several did so solely from savings—but those savings were not always built from high-wage work. Ana Martinez, owner of a tamale catering business in the Los Angeles area, used savings from her own independent tamale selling to start her business.

Repeatedly, however, the entrepreneurs told stories of how difficult this capital was to come by. When they applied for loans, as one said, “it was as if I was nonexistent to the banks.” And as another entrepreneur said, “Women are in the service industries. No one is going to fund the service industries.” Yet another echoed, “When you're small, they won't help you!” Maria de Lourdes Sobrino, owner of Lulu's Desserts, recalled, “Had I had [capital] from the beginning, I

could have done it faster. I had to start small, reinvest, reinvest. The credit on my small-business loan had a very high interest rate. I had no partners, no venture capital.”

Since Rubina Chaudhary had a difficult time finding start-up funds from banks, she used her own savings that she had built from her earnings. Yet even this back-up strategy came with a downside: when she approached the Small Business Administration about a potential loan, they scrutinized the source of the funds that she already had. She was taken aback: “I was the one who had earned that! The banks and the SBA all asked, ‘Do you have the capacity to run a business? Where will your start-up capital come from?’ I couldn’t get a credit line. I had to create credit: borrow the money and pay it off.” Ironically, the bank that refused to give Rubina an account in the beginning—a major nationally known bank—is today “doing *somersaults*” to get her as a client, she reported.

Entrepreneurs frequently found themselves in a Catch-22. Those starting businesses in fields that are atypical for women reported that they ran into any number of gender barriers in getting off the ground. On the other hand, women going into those fields that are *typical* for women—such as service industries—learned that the banks had no interest in investing. Credit histories—which are challenging to establish both for immigrants and for women in general—are critical for those who need start-up capital.

Social Capital

As a result, the needed capital often came via a second type of capital, which is social capital: these women listed a host of friends, associations, networks, husbands, sisters, parents, and colleagues who had helped them get their business started. When such individuals were able to offer informal loans, it was clearly the social capital that provided the key means of access to financial capital. Admittedly, men—and the native-born—rely on social capital for the same reasons, but they are going to be less reliant on these informal sources than foreign-born women will be.

At the more formal level of social capital, women’s business associations proved to be invaluable to some of these new enterprises. Among the associations that they lauded was the Orange County, California, chapter of the National Business Women’s Association (NAWBO). NAWBO offers workshops and networking meetings and places a strong emphasis on stimulating entrepreneurship. The resources of the Small Business Association were a key resource for several women interviewed here, especially in landing initial work.¹² Yet few of the women we interviewed took advantage of “set-asides”—government preference programs for contractors—or special loans to women- or minority-owned businesses. At least one said that in hindsight, she wishes she would have done so, perhaps if more information had been available about such programs at the time.

The availability of such programs at the state level has been declining, both as a result of public resistance to them and federal requirements that the programs must demonstrate statistically the continued existence of discrimination. At the federal level, set-asides have been ear-marked for ethnic diversity, not for gender diversity. The federal government was slow to move forward

on a proposed set-aside program for women, which Congress passed in 2000. The government finally acted on this bill in 2008, but with a very restricted number of contracts and limited to only a few industries. This announcement irritated women business owners, who were vocal about their disappointment, as they represent one-third of business ownership in the United States.¹³

Cultural Capital

Surprisingly, the women we interviewed did not mention one of the most common forms of capital that immigrant entrepreneurs usually have: ethnic associations formed by members of their home nationality. Why not? Might gender play a role here? The Los Angeles salon owner Pari Sayeri, for example, complained, “I didn’t have time to go to all of those Iranian meetings and sit around.” Between the time pressures of family commitments and struggling to earn an income, perhaps women are not finding that ethnic associations are universally filling the bill.

Two women who started their own catering business received their training through a not-for-profit venture, Mama’s Hot Tamales Café in Los Angeles. Although this is not an ethnic association per se, it is a venture that is, for obvious reasons, popular among Latin Americans. Initiated by former community organizer and third-generation Mexican immigrant Sandi Romero, the café’s mission is to help immigrants move from the informal to the formal economy. In her sunny, colorful, street-level restaurant, Sandi serves tamales to the local lunch crowd and trains people to make and sell tamales as street vendors and caterers.

Despite the absence of support from ethnic associations in these women’s lives, they reported the importance of some form of cultural capital. An example was those affiliated with Mama’s, who are tapping into the resource of tradition in order to transform it into a commodity. This is one of the more standard types of immigrant entrepreneurship—taking advantage particularly of the markets that coethnics offer to serve the cuisine or other products that characterize their community. But these entrepreneurs only *started* with those ethnic markets; eventually, they innovated their products and services to allow them to reach beyond those markets. Researchers note that such expansion is necessary to keep a business in a growth mode.¹⁴

A Romanian-born bed-and-breakfast owner, *Elisabeta*,¹⁵ once started a food booth while living in Canada, inventing her own fast-food recipes that combined Romanian cooking with Canadian preferences. She learned that Canadians would eagerly line up at the lunch counter for these unusual morsels. Another example comes from Esther Armstrong, who rarely sells her imported Ghanaian clothing to other Africans, as they can acquire the same items at lower prices on trips home. But she has attracted a clientele of African Americans who are rediscovering their heritage, and her business spikes around certain holidays, such as African Heritage Day in February. On one Sunday during Black History Month, some local churches celebrate African heritage through their attire. Firoza Diddee, with a medical-transcription business, reported, “My business knows no race or boundaries. . . . My business and service needed access to the broader population.”

Life as a Business Owner

These women spoke of their challenges, the varied life circumstances that led them to their current paths, and the eventual financial rewards. Most of these businesses now provide steady incomes for their owners, as well as for a host of employees—both foreign- and native-born.

Several, however, articulated a more *qualitative* meaning to their work as they reflected on their experiences. Rocio Ramirez, for example, spoke of her integration into U.S. society as she moved toward the ability to support herself independently. A recipient of Mama’s Hot Tamales Café training, she moved from making and selling handicrafts to owning a tamales catering business. She had moved to the United States to be with a boyfriend, whom she later married but eventually divorced. She found herself raising two teenagers, including one who is autistic. She recalled, “Before, it was very, very difficult. It is much better now. I can drive; now I’m a citizen, and I can buy a house. My son is in a special program.” Rocio proudly reported that she makes one thousand tamales per day “in twenty-five to thirty flavors.”

For civil engineer Xui Li, whose firm designs and builds bridges, business ownership gave her the opportunity to exercise both her management and her engineering skills. After receiving her engineering degree from an American university, she began her career as an employee for a large firm. She began to realize that there was no future for her in her company, even though she felt that the quality of her work was higher than that of her supervisors. She reflected on her own abilities to learn: “I am a hard worker; I pick up fast.” Once she went into business for herself, she was able to live up to her own potential. As she remembered, “I did it on my own, though I had a partner at first, who was the one pushing me. I got one bridge design project, so I started with that. I then started to get federal water projects. I didn’t want to do one bad job.” She is currently juggling five federal contracts, has seven permanent staff members, and hires a steady number of temporary contractors in the field.

Yolanda Voss, president of her own fashion-design studio and showroom in Columbia, Maryland, migrated from

Rubina Chaudhary’s Story

Indian-born Rubina Chaudhary started her business on a dare. She had begun to use her newly minted MBA degree to run training seminars on business skills for other professionals, and one day, one of her clients from these seminars dared her to start her own firm. She took the dare and built an engineering company. Today, she runs the business side of the firm, and her husband, an engineer, works for her firm, MARRS Services. She spoke about her eventual path as one that has a broader meaning than simply bringing home a steady paycheck. She recalled that when she was earning her MBA, one of her professors admonished her to “figure out what’s your reason for being.”

Today, Rubina’s office buzzes with activity—employees walking in and out, stopping for a coffee in the break room. With success has come that sense of purpose to which Rubina’s business professor had alluded: “It was the sheer joy of seeing an opportunity and going after it.” With thirty-seven employees across three offices, Rubina spoke proudly of her firm as a place to build opportunities for other people: “I help people grow, then my company grows. I have encouraged valuable employees to go elsewhere to further their careers. Yet we have an excellent return rate. I have two sets of clients: my employees and my clients, and if I meet their needs, my company will grow.” MARRS continues to expand and win awards.

Ecuador in 1962 with the dream of becoming a fashion designer. She immediately began taking courses in her field and establishing apprenticeships with mentors whom she admired. Her big break, which encouraged her to continue pursuing her career path, was the day that First Lady Betty Ford took notice of one of Yolanda's coat designs and purchased it for herself. At the beginning of building her business, however, Yolanda simultaneously endeavored to pass on the trade to younger generations by holding classes for students in the basement of her home. Thus, the pursuit of her own dream was, from the beginning, tied up with helping others to achieve their dreams. Today, she is a highly regarded member of her community.

Shirley Nathan-Pulliam decided to open group day-care facilities for the elderly and disabled after observing the conditions of facilities where her patients resided when she was working as a nurse. She had also desired more autonomy in her work. She wanted to open a place that people could come to and enjoy their surroundings. She envisioned a bright, cheerful environment where the elderly and disabled were truly cared for and comforted. Today, her two businesses, Nathan Networks and Extended Family Adult Day Care, bring in half a million dollars per year. Shirley spoke of that internal drive that she continues to feel and that keeps her motivated: "So it's just that inner passion and drive that you want to see people happy, and when I walk in my center—whether you're Alzheimer's, whether you had a stroke, whether you have dementia, whatever your problem is—I come alive when I walk in and hear the patients talking."

Sheela Murthy, from India, echoed the "passion" motive. After completing her degree at Harvard and working for a large law firm, she made the decision to go out on her own. She reflected,

"Always for me was a driving passion and a burning passion to change the world, and I think in the world of immigration law when we help clients . . . it's individual lives we're changing. . . . And many of them send money back to their home countries, so now you're helping the world economy."¹⁶

Maria Sobrino began her entrepreneurial life in the travel business in Mexico. After expanding the business to Los Angeles, however, the Mexican peso collapsed. She looked around in the United States and noticed the absence of a particular comfort food that Mexican children enjoyed three times a day: flavored gelatins, or *gelatinas*. Maria began experimenting with samples, and her friends encouraged her to produce them and to name the business Lulu, which is her nickname. She remembered, "Whatever you do, you need to love it. . . . Do you know how many people laughed at my idea of having *gelatinas* and selling them with a little jar three hundred cups a day that I was doing? Today we sell about fifty million cups a year of gelatin, and we distribute to supermarkets."¹⁷

A young Thai woman, Luck Pongsamart, got her business off the ground almost overnight. She happened to notice that a Chinese restaurant in a local shopping center was about to go out of business. Luck took her savings and bought the restaurant. She closed the facilities down for one week, did some basic renovations, practiced cooking a set of Thai recipes, and immediately

opened her new place. Her restaurant, set in a convenient corner of a shopping center and decorated with original art from her second business as an art dealer, has grown weekly since.

Other entrepreneurs spoke of intangible contributions of their business to their community. Pari Sayeri, from Iran, owns her own hair salon, which she built through years of hard work while also raising a family. Today, the hair salon has a family feel to it: Iranian immigrants, among others, form a steady, loyal clientele. A glass case that displays decorative objects from Iran adorns the shop, giving it an unusual feel for a salon. Pari describes it as a “warm place”: “Everybody comes here, has a coffee, a cookie, they say they love me. It keeps me busy.” Repeatedly, the women spoke of their pride in inspiring and training other women to own their own business. Denise, for example, now has a grown daughter who has opened her own firm.

“The First Two Years Were Hell”

None of these enterprises has grown without challenges—and many were quite serious. Pari Sayeri’s first hair salon was located in the popular Century City shopping complex in Los Angeles. For years, she successfully ran her salon, and her popularity grew. One day, however, Pari learned that she was being booted out. The shopping complex was renovating, updating, and upscaling. As she put it, “It was the rich people versus the normal people.” Pari fought to try to keep her space in the complex, but she lost her battle. Out of spite, she simply reopened her salon directly across the boulevard from the original complex, but she kept the same name: Century City Hair Design, with bold signage facing directly across the boulevard—meant for the eyes of the shopping-complex owners. Pari expected a lawsuit, but one never came. She proudly kept the name and is still operating today. Other entrepreneurs reported how tough their initial years had been: “There were more downs than ups”; “The first five years were very, very hard”; “We grew our own business on our mistakes, not our successes. . . . The first two years were *hell*.”

Challenges did not end after the business was off the ground. Judith, who runs the home-based child-care center, fights with inspectors and regulators and finds herself frequently frustrated by contradictions within the rules. Ana Martinez reported that she also had to “get a lot of permission from a lot of people” to start the tamale business and that rent is very high in the Los Angeles area.

Often, these business owners ran into obstacles that were clearly related to their race, nativity, and/or gender. Since each of these individuals would not have gotten where they are without a personality characterized by positive attitudes and hope, it is significant to note such complaints as: “There is always the problem of racism. Even if it is subtle, it is always there”; “I’m just a number”; “Few women have big empires. Men still have the lion’s share.” This last comment is confirmed by statistics. The loan programs available for women- and minority-owned businesses are primarily for companies that need less than fifty thousand dollars in start-up funds.¹⁸ Additionally, among all the start-up capital that is invested in the United States, only a sliver is invested in women’s enterprises; in 2006, only 3 percent of all venture-capital dollars went to women-owned businesses. Erin Abrams, writing in the online publication *The Glass Hammer*—a reference to the “glass ceiling,” the barrier to women’s rise to top

positions in business—has asked why the typical recipients of venture capital continue to be male.¹⁹

A vivid example of stereotyping was offered by the successful attorney Sheela Murthy, who is not one to whine about problems. One day she invited a broker to her office to consult with him about his request to invest her company's profits with his brokerage company. As they met, this broker repeatedly asked her, "Who really *owns* this company?" to which Sheela replied, "I do." The broker kept asking, however, "No, who *really* owns this company?" And Sheela kept insisting, "I do." As both parties repeated themselves with incredulity, Sheela's name was clearly visible: "Murthy Law Firm" was etched prominently across the glass windows and doors of the office where they met as they carried out this circular exchange of misfiring words.

Contributions

How is all this entrepreneurial energy affecting the economy—and society? It is near impossible to calculate a total monetary gain from business start-ups, called a "multiplier effect," including jobs created, tax revenues generated, consumer activity, homes purchased, interest paid, tuition contributed, charities supported, neighborhoods stabilized. Until recently, the regularly administered national Economic Census did not collect data on business owners' nativity, resulting in the absence of hard numbers regarding business revenue and job creation.²⁰ From the reports of these entrepreneurs, however, we can glean that such benefits are broad and range widely.

For example, Sheela Murthy's firm generates four to five million dollars per year²¹, employs more than seventy individuals in her Baltimore office (most of whom are native-born), and has opened a branch office in India. In the late 1990s, the *Baltimore Business Journal* named Sheela's firm as one of the top-twenty-five women-owned businesses in the area. Across three years in a row, from 2007 to 2009, Sheela received the accolade of a Maryland "Super Lawyer" by *Super Lawyers* magazine.

Rubina Chaudhary manages multimillion-dollar public contracts and consults with large public and private clients. Maria de Lourdes Sobrino, of Lulu's Desserts, runs a \$9.2 million business, operates a factory, and hires teams of employees to manage marketing, sales, and delivery. She has also written a book highlighting the stories of Latina entrepreneurs to inspire others. Angela Chan moved from working in a company with just over twenty employees to running a business with twenty-five hundred employees since it opened in 2001; the company makes two million wheels in the United States and manages five manufacturing plants in China. Trang Nguyen, owner of the restaurant Saigon Remembered, proudly reported that she trains her employees to open their own restaurants.

On June 11, 2008, the National Archives in Washington, DC brought three of these entrepreneurs together for a public panel discussion on immigrant women in business ownership. Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, Maria de Lourdes Sobrino, and Sheela Murthy were joined by home health-care business owner Yolanda Maria Welch of Baltimore. At that time, this

group of four women employed 224 individuals across their firms, illustrating that, collectively, the multiplier effect as measured by job creation could be calculated as “times fifty-six.”

These entrepreneurs are intensively involved in philanthropy. Sheela Murthy, for example, set up a foundation to support children’s education in India and donates her company’s used computers to public schools. Rubina Chaudary mentors inner-city youth in Los Angeles and is establishing a not-for-profit organization to expand her work. Ecuadorian fashion designer Yolanda Voss hosts regular fashion shows to benefit a medical clinic. Every year, she provides twelve internships in design and merchandising, which have totaled more than two hundred over her career.

Salon owner Pari Sayeri sends “a lot” of money to Iran for poor children and local schools. Thai restaurant owner Luck Pongsamart sends funds to Thailand to provide services for abandoned, mentally disabled children. Angela Chan personally gives to a Taiwanese foundation for people victimized by earthquakes and other disasters; she and her employees give volunteer hours to a free health clinic in Los Angeles County, and they give food to a homeless shelter. Such efforts mirror trends that have been documented nationally: women and immigrants are known for higher levels (per capita) of giving to their communities than are men and the native-born. More than half of high-net-worth women business owners (both native- and foreign-born) contribute more than twenty-five thousand dollars annually to charity; 19 percent give one million dollars or more.²²

Shirley Nathan-Pulliam straddles the worlds of business and politics. A native of Jamaica who has lived in Maryland since 1960 and is the founder of two health-care businesses, she began to contribute to Black-empowerment initiatives in the 1970s. One of those was a local organization attempting to keep Black-created wealth in the community, on the realization that “the dollar stays in our community only overnight.” Shirley served on this organization’s board and, after a few years, decided to run for state-level political office. After one defeat, she ran as a state assembly representative from a newly created district, won the election, and has been reelected ever since. Today, she is among the most passionate defenders of immigrant rights in the Maryland State Assembly.

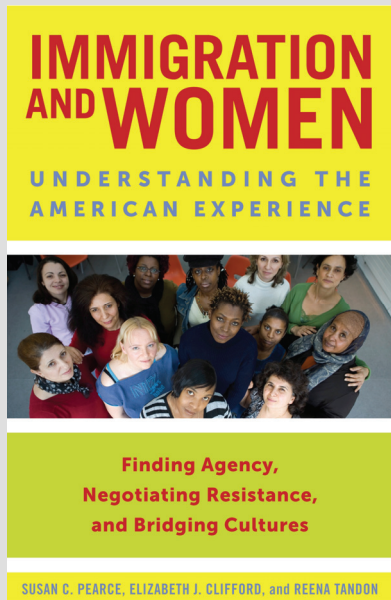
RECOMMENDATIONS

After surviving the challenges that business ownership entails, the women profiled here have created scores of new jobs, helped stabilize neighborhoods, created products that consumers enjoy, built major infrastructure projects, and invested in a wide range of charitable social-justice projects. Keenly aware of the advantages that business ownership brings, these women want to see an easier and more transparent process for their entrepreneurial successors. Among their advice and suggestions for improvement were:

- Make startup capital easier to access—and in larger amounts.

- Remove or reform bureaucratic hurdles to startups.
- Provide clearer information on local, state, and federal regulations.
- Given the realities of discrimination, renew efforts to support set-asides, based on gender as well as nativity and race.
- Continue to address barriers to women’s success in the conventional workplace.
- Accelerate attempts to make it easier to balance paid employment with family demands.

Regarding the final two recommendations, many women start businesses after disappointments with discrimination in the conventional workplace, related to gender, race, age, or nativity. And although such negative experiences help till the ground for new startups, this does not imply that such problems do not need reform. More concerted attention to all of these matters would likely come about if more immigrant women were integrated into decision-making bodies related to start-ups, set-asides, venture capital, and business associations—and were selected as leaders in those bodies.



Immigration and Women: Understanding the American Experience

The popular debate around contemporary U.S. immigration tends to conjure images of men waiting on the side of the road for construction jobs, working in kitchens or delis, driving taxis, and sending money to their wives and families in their home countries, while women are often left out of these pictures. *Immigration and Women* is a national portrait of immigrant women who live in the United States today, featuring the voices of these women as they describe their contributions to work, culture, and activism.

This book is available for purchase through NYU’s website, <http://nyupress.org/>.

Endnotes

¹ Jeanne Hallady Coughlin and Andrew R. Thomas, *The Rise of Women Entrepreneurs: People, Processes, and Global Trends* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2000).

² Barbara Howe, "Immigration as a Factor in Nineteenth-Century Women's Employment in West Virginia Cities," *Conference Proceedings for V Taller Científico Internacional "Mujeres en el Siglo XXI"* (Havana: University of Havana, 2003), p. 18.

³ According to the 2010 American Community Survey, the top-ten states where foreign-born entrepreneurial women work are California, New York, Florida, Texas, Illinois, New Jersey, Virginia, Georgia, Arizona, and Massachusetts. The top-ten metropolitan areas are Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Houston, Orange County CA, San Francisco, Atlanta, San Diego, and Fort Lauderdale.

⁴ According to the 2000 U.S. decennial census, 575,740 foreign-born women who immigrated as adults reported that they were self-employed in their own incorporated or unincorporated businesses, which is the census category that researchers use to measure entrepreneurship.

⁵ We caution that the decennial census and the American Community Survey are not strictly comparable, since one attempts to count all U.S. residents, and the other surveys a sample. This is the best gauge available, however, for showing recent changes over time.

⁶ For additional statistics, see Susan Pearce, *Today's Immigrant Woman Entrepreneur* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, January 2005).

The rates from 2000 in that report vary from these to some extent, due to the use of different sample sizes (1 percent was used for that report and 5 percent for this report); it also limited the sample to those who worked 20 weeks per year as opposed to 14 weeks in the current study (see endnote above). Further, we confined the population in this current study to those who immigrated as adults.

⁷ Center for Women's Business Research, "Minority Reports," (<http://www.womensbusinessresearch.org/minorityreports.html>.)

⁸ David Griffith, Ricardo Contreras, and Ed Kissam, "Calidad y Confianza (Quality & Trust): Latino Entrepreneurship in North Carolina and Beyond." Second Latino Leadership Summit. David Griffith's Keynote Speaker Presentation. Greenville, North Carolina, June 5, 2009.

⁹ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *The Force of Domesticity. The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Veronica González Aguilar, *Women's Participation in Microfinance* (Washington, DC: Office of Advocacy, U.S. Small Business Administration, 1999), (<http://www.globenet.org/archives/web/2006/www.globenet.org/horizon-local/ada/9905women.html>.)

Food producers may, of course, work for a landowner or other supervisor, but in many areas of the world, women are traditionally in charge of their own subsistence farms.

¹¹ The typology of various forms of capital is taken from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹² The number of women receiving SBA assistance may be overrepresented here in contrast to the national average, since it was an SBA representative who provided the contacts for those interviews. This representative, Don Mitchell, lost his life since these interviews were conducted, and we honor his spirit and contribution here.

¹³ Elizabeth Olson, "Women Business Owners Seek Better Access to Federal Contracts," *New York Times*, October 1, 2008, p. C4.

¹⁴ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, International Migration Policy Program, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs," *Research Perspectives on Migration* (1997) 1:1-15, p. 6. (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/files/RPMVol1-No2.pdf>)

¹⁵ Italicized names are pseudonyms.

¹⁶ Excerpted from The National Archives, "Citizens by Choice: Women in Business Leadership" panel discussion (Washington, DC: The National Archives, June 11 2008). (<http://www.archives.gov/nae/news/featured-programs/citizens-women/080611citizens-panel.pdf>.)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pyong Gap Min and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "USA: The Entrepreneurial Cutting Edge," in Robert Koosterman and Jan Rath, eds., *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Venturing Abroad in the Age of Globalization*, edited (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 17-38.

¹⁹ Erin Abrams, "Women in Venture Capital," *The Glass Hammer*, April 14, 2008. ([http://www.theglasshammer.com/news/2008/08/14/women-in-venture-capital/.](http://www.theglasshammer.com/news/2008/08/14/women-in-venture-capital/))

²⁰ See Susan Pearce, *Today's Immigrant Woman Entrepreneur* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, January 2005), p. 11.

For an analysis of the economic contributions, including homeownership. Homeownership has a domino effect on consumption, as the home-owner purchases furnishings, renovations, repairs, cleaning services, landscaping, and other amenities.

<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/images/File/infocus/Immigrant%20Women%20Entrepreneurs.pdf>

²¹ Sheela Murthy's firm's revenues have almost doubled since this research was conducted.

²² Center for Business Women's Research, "Minority Reports." (<http://www.womensbusinessresearch.org/minorityreports.html>.)