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## WHEN **WOMEN** COME FIRST

GENDER  
AND  
CLASS  
IN  
TRANSNATIONAL  
MIGRATION

SHEBA MARIAM GEORGE

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## When Women Come First

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Gender and Class in  
Transnational Migration

Sheba Mariam George

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

*Berkeley / Los Angeles / London*

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University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

George, Sheba Mariam, 1966–.

When women come first : gender and class in transnational migration /  
Sheba Mariam George.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-24318-8 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-520-24319-6 (pbk. : alk.  
paper)

1. Women, East Indian — United States — Social conditions. 2. Women  
immigrants — United States — Social conditions. 3. Women, East Indian —  
Employment — United States. 4. Women immigrants — Employment —  
Social aspects — United States. 5. Nurses — United States — Social  
conditions. 6. East Indians — United States — Social conditions.  
7. Sex role — United States. 8. Man-woman relationships — United States.  
9. Man-woman relationships — India. 10. Transnationalism. I. Title.

E184.E2G46 2005

305.48'891411073 — dc22

2004020977

Manufactured in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on Ecobook 50 containing a minimum 50% post-consumer waste,  
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Forest Stewardship Council Certified for no old-growth tree cutting,  
processed either TCF or ECF. The sheet is acid-free and meets the minimum  
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*For my parents, George Mathew and Annamma George*



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## Foreword

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Immigration is the great American drama, assimilation and upward mobility its great dream. But you won't find these dreams in Sheba George's moving tale of emigration from Kerala, India, to the United States. Hers is a narrative of continuing connection back to communities of origin — visitations on the occasion of birth, marriage, or death; the exchange of kith and kin (parents, children, and spouses); the flow of material aid and gifts; visual memories in photographs and homemade videos; and frequent phone calls and, increasingly, electronic mail, not to mention the old-fashioned letter. (Kerala, after all, has the highest literacy rate in India.) Sheba George focuses on the families, divided and unified in the process of transplantation, and how they create a Kerala of their own in Central City that is still tightly bound to the Kerala of India. Her ethnographic eye dwells on the different spheres of life in the United States — work, home, and community — on their interrelations and their internal composition, rather than on their degree of absorption into the wider United States.

To conduct ethnographic research is to continually revisit the people one is studying. But as Sheba George does so, she also nostalgically revisits her own childhood. When Sheba was ten, her mother departed for the United States to ply her nursing skills, leaving Sheba and her two younger brothers in the gentle care of their father. Two years later they would be reunited with their mother in a new land. *When Women Come First* uncovers the sociological meaning of this journey.

Sheba spent a year and a half in Central City interviewing, observing, and participating in the community created by an unusual migration

stream, one originated by nurses from Kerala. What happens, Sheba George asks, when women come first and the men follow later, when women are the main breadwinners and men are secondary earners? How resilient is the traditional hierarchy in the family in the face of challenges created by female-led immigration? The answer is by no means singular, depending as it does on the age and number of children, the shift work of the nurses, and the presence of supportive kin from or in Kerala. Women are as likely to voluntarily compensate for their men's loss of esteem by ceding them authority in matters of finance, for example, as they are to flaunt their command of the purse strings. And men are as likely to accept a redivision of domestic labor and child care as they are to insist on conventional patterns. More often than not, more egalitarian households result.

If relations are renegotiated in the family, male leadership is reasserted in the community, in the Indian Orthodox Syrian Christian Church, which brings Keralites together from far and wide. The men organize food and festivities, and the women are passive onlookers, prodded into subordination by other members of the congregation. The church is perhaps sowing the seeds of its own demise, however, given how out of touch it is with the gender expectations of the next generation, now being brought up in American schools. Thus, Father John, the priest at St. George's, knew what he was doing in welcoming the sociologist into his parish. He sought to broaden the vision of the church elders by involving Sheba in Sunday school teaching and in caroling, the latter being an activity monopolized by men. Sheba's compact with the priest led to a transgressive ethnography that, for all the discomfort it brought, served her well by revealing the strongly held norms that bound the older parishioners together.

Even as they try to create a space of domination and leadership, "nurse-husbands," as they are pejoratively called, are stigmatized by the middle-class men who came to the United States under their own steam, with their own social and cultural capital. The "nurse-husbands," these middle-class men scoff, are living off the earnings of "dirty nurses." Tragically, the defense of their dignity through the assertion of traditional norms within the church is thus turned against the husbands of nurses, who are humbled and hobbled by the stigma against nursing. In India, nursing is "polluted" work because it involves the touching of random bodies, a practice traditionally shunned by Hindus. It is more easily taken up by Christians, who have effectively taken advantage of the global demand for their profession, only to experience, in turn, the resentment aimed at the female parvenu.

The community of Keralites in Central City is tightly bound, materially and spiritually, to the world of Kerala. To understand the former required returning to the latter and examining the changing world of India and its floating stigma. Sheba George retraced the path of migration, but in reverse. She sought out the kin of her informants in Central City, as well as the community's connections to the Syrian Christian Church, which is the most powerful source of norms at play in the immigrant community. But here she confronted the limits of multisited global ethnography, because the connections led her all over Kerala — to no single community, and to no single set of norms. She found Kerala to be much more diverse than the sheltered, reconstituted community of Central City that it sustained. So, she asks finally, can the Keralite community in Central City, and those all over the United States, sustain themselves from one generation to the next despite their inner tensions and contradictions, despite the temptation of assimilation? Are we really living in a new era of globalization wherein diasporas can be sustained from one generation to the next? And how will American society greet the children of these immigrants? Will it be possible for a transnational Keralite community to be part of the plural world of the United States?

We live in a world that has loosened the bonds of patriarchy. Women now are as likely as men to migrate. We must adjust our theories accordingly. When women take off from Kerala or the Philippines, from Russia or Guatemala, do they come as single workers who will later be reunited with their country of origin, or do they come as members of families to settle in their country of adoption? In the one case, we find the creation of the transnational family, and in the other we find the migration of families or even whole communities. Sheba George casts light in both directions, demonstrating the significance of women coming first but never losing sight of the men they left behind, or the men who then follow.

Michael Burawoy



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## Acknowledgments

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It has been noted that most occasions, even birthday parties, begin with prayer and thanksgiving among Indian Christians from the state of Kerala. So it is fitting that I begin this study of Keralite Christian immigrants by acknowledging my gratitude to God, who guided me through a maze of uncertainties to complete this book. I am also thankful that I have been given this wonderful opportunity to study and write about a topic very close to my heart.

I could not have written this book without the willing participation of the men and women at St. George's Orthodox Church and their families in Kerala, who generously shared their lives and their precious time with me. I am especially grateful to the priest at St. George's for the abundant hospitality he showed me. His sponsorship was critical to the success of my research. Furthermore, various people in Kerala — nurses, nursing school deans, church leaders, and seminary professors — took the time to talk with me and teach me a great deal from their experiences. Although I do not name them individually for various reasons, including confidentiality, I am ever grateful to all of them for their indispensable help.

Similarly, while there are many who taught me much along the way, I acknowledge in particular two teachers who were instrumental in shaping my thinking about this book. The first is Michael Burawoy, without whom this book would not have been possible. As chair of my dissertation committee, Michael was there at the inception of this project and enthusiastically helped plant seeds and watered the dream that resulted in this publication. He was an ever-present sounding board and provided a critical but encouraging ear to the most underdeveloped ideas. My work



has benefited greatly from his consistent and engaged interest and generous involvement. The second is R. Stephen Warner, who has believed in the value of my research from the start. He has extended both academic support and personal friendship in several key ways, helping bring this project to fruition. His thoughtful insights and careful readings from beginning to end have been extremely important in shaping the direction of this book.

I was fortunate to receive a great deal of institutional support that provided necessary intellectual and financial assistance throughout my research and writing. I began this endeavor as a predissertation fellow of the New Ethnic Immigrant Congregation Project (NEICP) directed by R. Stephen Warner of the University of Illinois and funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and the Pew Charitable Funds. I am grateful to Steve for seeing the potential in a quickly put-together proposal and to his codirector, Judith Wittner, and the other NEICP fellows for all their encouragement.

Along the way, I was supported with fellowships from the American Institute for Indian Studies for conducting research in Kerala and from the Louisville Institute in Kentucky, the Sloan Berkeley Center for Work and Family, and the University of California in the early writing stages of the project. The final process of revising and writing was facilitated by a residential scholarship in the Department of Sociology at Pomona College in Claremont, California; a National Institute of Mental Health postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California, Los Angeles; and support from the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles. I am especially grateful to Ricky Bluthenthal for his timely help and to Richard S. Baker at the Research Center for Minority Institutions at Charles Drew for his unquestioning support and belief in a project that was quite outside his disciplinary boundaries.

Several people in the broader academic community, particularly at Berkeley, helped me in the development of my research and writing. I am thankful to them even though I did not always heed their suggestions. Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Raka Ray, as members of my dissertation committee, provided essential constructive criticism. I was the recipient of many intellectual generosities from all the participants at the Berkeley Center for Work and Family, particularly Arlie Hochschild, Barrie Thorne, Anita Garey, Julio Cammarota, and Scott North. While the process of writing is long and often lonely, I have been fortunate to have the support of colleagues who have made the journey much more collective and collaborative. Maria Cecilia Dos Santos, Naheed Islam, Elizabeth Rudd, and Millie Thayer gave me helpful feedback in the early conceptualization and

writing stages. More recently, Naheed Islam and Elizabeth Rudd painstakingly read and commented on my manuscript, improving it greatly. With the encouragement of the Global Ethnographers — Joseph Blum, Zsuzsa Gille, Teresa Gowen, Lynne Haney, Maren Klawiter, Steven H. Lopez, Seán Ó Riain, and Millie Thayer — I expanded my project to include transnational connections to Kerala. Troy Duster, Michael Omi, David Minkus, and the Institute for the Study of Social Change have supported me in several ways by their sheer presence. I am grateful to Kamau Birago for always looking out for me. Leslie Salzinger and Louise Lamphere, at Berkeley, were very helpful in the early conceptualization of this project. Russell Jeung, Carolyn Chen, and Jane Iwamura provided intellectual and spiritual companionship in thinking about Asian American religion, among other topics. I owe special thanks to Jonathan VanAntwerpen, who helped me get back on track with his thoughtful feedback and tons of encouragement.

I am grateful to several individuals who were instrumental in helping me complete this project. Leyla Bijan, Vrinda Koovakadu, and Shermin Zarabi transcribed and helped code interviews. In Kerala, Santhosh Varghese not only helped with transcription but also accompanied me on several research trips around Kerala, where it was difficult for a woman to travel without a male escort. My cousins Manasseh Zechariah and Jasleen Kohli, during their graduate student days at University of California, Irvine, and University of California, Riverside, took time out of their busy schedules on many occasions to search out the books that I needed from their respective libraries. Susan Koshy, Karen Cheng, and Peter Hammond all gave of their time and energy to read and comment on the entire manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Naomi Schneider and her staff at University of California Press for believing in this project and remaining calm and cool despite the delays. I especially thank my reviewers, who gave me thoughtful comments that helped improve the book.

Last but not least, my family played an integral part in helping me complete this project. I thank my brothers, Mathew George and Jacob George, and my sisters-in-law, Soli George and Sajini George, for all the ways they loved me and kept me grounded as I moved between Berkeley, Central City, and India. My aunt Rachel Zachariah not only helped me in a professional capacity by sending me information on nursing matters, but she has always been a role model to me in balancing family and academic commitments.

I am thankful for all the help I have received from my husband, Kirk Edwards. He has been a constant source of encouragement and tireless

support, reading and editing sections, solving word-processing problems, and helping me to finally complete this book. He is an inspiration, and I am grateful for his partnership.

Both my children were born after I began working on this manuscript. My daughter, Roshni, and my son, Vinay, were deprived of time with their mother without having been given a choice. I am especially grateful to Vinay, who had exquisite timing coming into this world: he was born the day after I sent off a revised copy of my manuscript to the board of the press for final approval. I was doubly overjoyed when the book was approved for publication a few weeks after he was born.

I dedicate this book to my parents for their pioneering spirit and their courage to leave behind the comfortable and the familiar to emigrate to the United States. I appreciate the magnitude of their decision much more now that I have a family with small children of my own. But most of all, I am grateful for their unconditional love, which gave me a bedrock on which to build my life.



MAP 1. The state of Kerala within India.



MAP 2. The districts that make up the state of Kerala. The shaded districts are those where I conducted interviews with family members of the individuals I interviewed in Central City, and with church officials and focus groups composed of nurses.

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## Introduction

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I remember pressing my face against the warm glass of the airport window as I watched the plane whisk my mother away. My father and two brothers stood with me at the airport in Bangalore, India. My mother was off to the United States to work as a nurse. I was ten at the time and my brothers were both younger than I was. As the *chechi*, or big sister, I tried to be brave. But I felt my heart breaking, and I remember that I could not stop crying. I cried so much that I fell sick with a fever for several days after my mother left.

We did not see my mother again until two years later, when we too emigrated to the United States. In the time spent away from us, my mother stayed with her sister and then a friend (both nursing professionals) as she prepared for, and passed, the licensing examination to practice nursing in the United States. She was then able to work as a registered nurse and save the money needed to bring us over.

As an adult, I have had the unusual opportunity of revisiting this significant childhood experience of immigration. In writing this book, I have begun to understand my family's experiences within a larger historical and sociological context of displacement and change. From a distance afforded by time, and with a set of sociological lenses, I have been able to interpret my family's postimmigration experiences as an attempt to find balance again at both the family and the community level. On the face of it, this story is no different from the typical immigration saga: It is about a group of people who leave home to seek better opportunities. In the process, their lives are irreversibly changed in unexpected ways.

However, a closer look reveals how a reversal in the usual gender order of immigration results in a unique immigration experience.

As immigration stories are commonly imagined, the primary male immigrant arrives first, to be followed by the wife and children after he is settled. Atypically, in this story we encounter an immigration wave made up of women who came first and then sponsored their families. In fact, many women, like my mother, left their village homes in the state of Kerala and migrated to the larger cities of India to study nursing. From there, in a step-migration process, they emigrated to different parts of the world, relying on mostly female networks. In this book, I study one immigrant community in the United States made up mostly of nurses. I ask the question of what happens to gender relations when women come first and are the primary breadwinners.

As my family began to settle down in the United States, we went through the typical challenges faced by immigrants adapting to a new society. While we children were not so aware of it at the time, it was particularly difficult for my father, armed with skills and work experience that did not easily translate, to find employment in a U.S. economy facing recession. My father, who had been a white-collar worker in a British company in India, found that his credentials and work experience were not recognized in the United States. I remember my father's presence around the house as he looked for work while my mother worked double shifts to meet our expenses. Finally, after many months, my father found a clerical job for which he was overqualified.

My family's experience was not unusual relative to the other immigrant families we knew. However, historically in the United States, it is unusual for women to be the first immigrants and primary breadwinners for the family. In most immigrant communities, when women have worked outside the home, typically they have had access only to secondary and tertiary labor market jobs such as service and domestic work. But immigrant nurses like my mother are skilled professionals who enter a labor market experiencing a consistent shortage in nursing staff, and who therefore have more of a say in setting the terms of their employment. Meanwhile, their husbands are unable to find jobs comparable to the ones they held before immigration. Consequently, this affects gender relations in the family. That women typically earn more than the men who initially depend on them raises difficult questions, particularly for the men. These issues, which run the gamut from definitions of masculinity and femininity to basic self-worth, affect both men and women individually, as well as the dynamics of the family. A second broad question I explore in

this book is how men and women deal with such changes in the delicate balance of gender relations after immigration.

Without relatives or friends nearby, my family found community and support in the immigrant Indian Christian church. The church service — which took place in rented halls in the early years — met both a religious and a social need for us. People drove many miles to attend the three-hour-long Sunday morning service and the potluck lunches that usually followed. There were frequent parties and regular prayer meetings in the homes of church members. I, as well as my contemporaries, found it difficult to distinguish between the parties and the prayer meetings. Every event began with lengthy Orthodox prayers — which were required to properly respect the priest's presence — and ended with food. Our social lives revolved around the church as church members became our extended family and community in the United States. The unusual dynamics in my own home made me aware of the tensions surrounding gender relations in the community.

I did not understand this at the time, but my parents were atypical in their gendered behavior. My father had always involved himself in child rearing and enjoyed taking an active role in our affairs even when nannies and others cared for us at home in India. By nature, he was — and indeed still is — extremely nurturing, and we three children gravitated toward him. My father was also a very creative person who enjoyed cooking and inventing his own concoctions in the kitchen. Consequently, even while we were in India, my father was not a stranger to the kitchen or to child-care. My mother often stayed in the background but participated in our care in a different way. Especially in the two years when our mother lived apart from us in the United States, our father became our sole parental caretaker.

After my family was reunited, my parents continued to behave as they always had. Without the help they had had in India, my parents both took part in the household and child-care tasks. However, I noticed many an occasion where other men in the community would tease my father for his ability to cook, and he would laugh it off. There were times when my mother made a point of cooking when we were expecting company, so that my father would not be teased. Even as a child, I sensed the underlying tension concerning this subject.

I remember thinking that my father's contributions to the household were unique, but since then I have found that it is not uncommon for men to take the lead in cooking and child care in the Keralite immigrant community. What was unique about my father was that, despite social



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