



## Structural Vulnerability and Social Integration of F-2 Visa Holders in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

*Previous studies on spouses of international students do not explore how F-2 visa regulations preventing them from working and becoming full-time students affect their social integration and building social networks. This ethnographic research about 16 formerly employed female spouses of international students in Central University<sup>1</sup> aims to fill this gap, inspired by Holmes's Structural Vulnerability concept (2011), which suggests shifting attention from immigrants themselves to structural powers in order to detect what endangers immigrants' well-being. Through a multimethod approach, this article shows that F-2 visa regulations limit social integration and building social networks of the participants due to their F-2 visa regulations, and consequently affect their self-esteem, mental health, loneliness, and family relationships of the participants, despite the Central University and related/local offices efforts in integrating them in the society.*

**Keywords:** immigration policy, social integration, structural vulnerability, social isolation, F-2 visa, women

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Most spouses of international students come to the US with F-2 visa, and they are mostly female (Jiang et al., 2020). Becoming a student or going to work could enhance the social integration and socialization of the female F-2 visa holders; however, F-2 visa regulations prevent its holders from working and studying as a full-time student (Kim, 2006). This article focuses on the female F-2 visa holders in Central University, who used to be professional before coming to the US and aims to explore how previously employed female F-2 visa holders integrate in the society and build a social network while they are not allowed to work. In

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<sup>1</sup> Central University is a pseudonym for a public university in the US.

additions, this article aims to explore whether the Central University, offices related to the university and churches help these spouses in this regard. The reason is studies on international students in the US show that these students though they study at the university and are allowed to work face difficulty in integrating in the society and finding friends (Shao-Kuo, 2001; Sherry et al., 2010). Thus, the assumption is F-2 visa holder dependents are more in danger of social isolation because they have to stay at home instead of going out to society and work. However, there is a lack of emphasis on how the regulations of the F-2 visa negatively affect F-2 visa holders' social integration and building social network in previous literature, and how helpful are the universities and local institutions in helping the F-2 visa holders' social integration.

Paying attention to the social integration and socialization of the F-2 visa holders is important because building a social network is essential for immigrants in their new destination as it can prevent them from social isolation, subsequently decrease the feeling of loneliness and improve their sense of belonging and their settlement (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014). In addition, when individuals immigrate, socializing and building a social network become important for immigrants' survival as they help them to acquire needed materials (Vega et al., 1991). Moreover, building social network can prevent negative outcomes on mental health, such as depression among immigrant minorities in the host country (Silveira & Allebeck, 2001). This is because of the fact that social factors is one of the factors playing a role in psychological and physical health (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

Emphasizing on the fact that spouses of international students are mostly women who are not allowed to work due to the F-2 visa regulations (Jiang et al., 2020; Bordoloi, 2015), scholars believe that socializing and building social networks can be a necessary support for female immigrants. The reason is not having a social network including family or friends ties and loss of a job can decrease coping with reestablishment and rebuilding the new life in the new destination; consequently affecting female immigrants' health, and increasing anger and resentment (Meadows et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, female spouses of international students do not belong to a community in comparison to their student husbands (de la Serna, 2022), and social isolation becomes a common problem among the women whose their husbands has a job in the host country. For example, similar to spouses of international students, a study about wives of skilled immigrants in London by Ryan and Mulholland (2014) shows that although men get occupied by going to work, women stay home and have to find their social network; due to not being employed it is a challenging process for the wives as these women should build a social network by finding opportunities that align with their interests and needs.

As lack of employment caused by F-2 visa regulations can negatively affect the financial aspect of the life of F-2 visa holders especially their husbands due to their student visa has some limitations in accessing better paid job, it is important to explore to what extent financial limitations caused by F-2 visa regulations

affect the social integration of the F-2 visa holders. For instance, a study in Canada among lower and higher income families shows that lower-income people face more social isolation and less sense of community belonging than higher-income people (Stewart et al., 2009).

Moreover, because immigrants may not have family ties in their new destinations, they should build their new social circle again, which needs a reciprocal relationship to be able to keep their relationships with other people, such as friends. In fact, having a reciprocal relationship needs money, and McMichael and Manderson (2004) show that the relationships in the immigration context are mostly reciprocal and money can play a major role in maintaining the relationship by allowing ethnic communities to share and socialize with their social network.

When it comes to spouses of international students, other than unemployment, Kim (2012) mentioned that immigration status, language and cultural barriers negatively affect the acculturation and social integration of female spouses of international students. However, there is a lack of study on the social integration of professional women who do not have a language barrier when they live in the host country, and emphasis on the role of F-2 visa regulations and the institutions in the society. According to Holmes (2011), to highlight how immigrants suffer, researchers should pay attention to structural powers, such as immigration policies instead of focusing on the immigrants themselves to underline how their well-being becomes vulnerable by structural powers. Bourgois et al. explain structural vulnerability as when a certain group in a society overlaps with power hierarchies, such as socio-economic status and institutional and policy status like being an immigrant (2017). Therefore, this article explores the role of structural barriers on the social integration and building social network of the F-2 visa holders.

## **METHOD**

To explore how F-2 visa regulations make F-2 visa holders structurally vulnerable in terms of their social integration and building social network in the US, this study after receiving IRB approval interviewed 16 women, online and face-to-face from ten different countries to see how F-2 visa affected their social life from their perspectives. The inclusion criteria for the women in this study was speaking English, above 18 years old and used to work before coming to the US. The recruitment was through face-to-face invitation, sending mass emails through local offices, using flyers, and word of mouth.

The semi-structured interview took one to one hour and thirty minutes. Also, to triangulate the data, this study used participant observation of four participants in mostly public settings, such as events in Central University, churches and community centers to explore how the participants integrated in the society by writing field notes. Participant observation was appropriate for getting close to people to better understand their life (Bernard, 2011). Moreover, this study used two demographic secondary data. The first secondary data was from Central

University showing the population of F-2 visa holders in Central University in Fall 2021 and compared it with a demographic data from International Students and their Families Affairs<sup>2</sup>, a university related organization which helps international students and their family settle in the US and organize free classes and events for these groups to explore what number of spouses using this resource. For data analysis, this study used open coding to see what themes appear from the interview transcriptions and field notes. In this type of coding, rather than enforcing a set of codes to the data, the data an iterative process is used to code and recode data to create a list of codes that are used to form themes (Ezzy, 2002). This type of coding is appropriate for a phenomenological study as it does not impose predefined codes and preconceptions on the data, which makes possible accessing the true essence of the experience.

## **RESULTS**

In general, the activities that F-2 women in this study do in their free time were mostly studying or reading, household duties, spending time with family members and watching TV. Also, 9 out of 16 participants mentioned that they have different social activities, such as meeting friends or what some call “their husbands’ friends” and doing religious, cultural or church organized activities and participating in English classes organized by churches. In addition, five out of 16 spouses of international students worked as a volunteer, and two of them mentioned that it helped them to find friends. Two mentioned there were restrictions in doing volunteer jobs for F-2 visa holders, such as working in a dog shelter or student organization because these jobs are reserved for Americans and or students.

### **No Effect on Social Integration**

Almost half of the women mentioned that F-2 visa policy did not affect their social life by affecting their socializing and social integration in the US due to different reasons. For example, having a lot of free time helped Tina to see her friends and have a coffee when her kids were at school. Also, having opportunity to socialize, such as having a community, availability of voluntary work at schools for parents and finding many people at her age were other factors helping them to integrate in the society. Moreover, personal characteristics such as being sociable person and having experience of living in an unknown environment were helpful to prevent negative effects on their social life by F-2 visa regulations. However, even among these women who felt that their social life was not affected by F-2 visa regulations, two of the women mentioned it was hard to have a social network and two of them along other three women experienced decrease in their social contacts and increase in loneliness due to staying at home, not working and not

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<sup>2</sup> It is a pseudonym for an organization related to Central University who works with international students and their family.

being in the society. Being lonely at home and limitation in meeting people created negative effects on mental health or mood of three women. For example, Maria said, "(...) He is doing research, and he is reading whereas I am kind of constrained within the walls. Loneliness has caused a huge impact on my mental health. Constantly being lonely as my child is in college."

### **Change of Personality**

F-2 visa regulations by preventing these women from working and enforcing them staying at home changed few participants in a way that they had some changes in their personality. For example, Leyla mentioned that she became more like an introvert rather than an extrovert. She listens rather than talking and became a follower rather than a leader/initiator. For Rebecca, she was a sociable person and enjoyed talking to others or participating public activities but due to staying at home, it was hard for her to go to meetings which changed her in a way that she did not like it.

Also, F-2 visa regulations by limiting these women from social integration negatively affected few participants' self-confidence. Mariah said that she felt separated from others because everyone was working, and she was not, which made her feel less confident. Sue did not feel confident and powerful like before because she used to have her own friends and job. She felt that her identity always depended on her husband which made her feel that she is not a whole or real person.

### **Family Relationships**

Among these women there were five women who did activities mostly with their husbands or children. The need for emotional support, not having friends available due to limited number of friends and not knowing the environment intersected with lack of not efficient outreach from the Central University and institutions related to the university which increased the pressure on husbands who were busy with their academic life and led to marital conflicts for few women. Not only the husbands were affected, but also two mothers mentioned that being an F-2 visa holder affected their children's life. For example, Mariah said due to not having a car and financial limitations caused partly due to not working, they could not visit their child and spend time as a family even if they were in the same country. Sarah also mentioned that her son was little sad and bored because he did not have any friends as he could not spend his time around new people.

In the section below, the results from the secondary data, participant observation and interview helped to have a full picture of why F-2 visa holders are less socially integrated and limited in building social networks in the society due to the F-2 visa regulations which intersects with their access to the institutional resources offered by church, Central University and the university related offices.

## **Effects of F-2 Visa Regulations on Social Life of Spouses**

The most significant barrier in social integration and building social network of the F-2 visa holders was F-2 visa regulations as the participants were not allowed to work or become a full-time student. In fact, there were few women talking about language, cultural barriers, smallness of the city, and COVID-19 as factors affecting their social life negatively. For example, one participant felt uncomfortable speaking English due to feeling her English was not good. In terms of cultural barriers, one participant Kelly, mentioned American people are not as warm and close as people like her ethnic group. Also, Kelly was the only person who mentioned about the negative effects of COVID-19 as she said that people became worried to be close to each other which negatively affected her social integration. However, this data was gathered from early 2022 to the end of 2022, and interestingly COVID-19 was not mentioned as a significant barrier for their social integration. In fact, one participant Leyla mentioned that COVID-19 helped her to not feel bored as her husband stayed home and worked compared to after COVID-19 when she was home alone, and her husband was not home mostly.

Although not working caused by F-2 visa regulations logically creates more free time for these women, it had an important effect on the social life of them.

(...) I can't work. I think if a person has not work to do, it means that he or she is not really live in this society. So, I mean everyone in this city, they are nice to me. They are very friendly, but I don't think that it's a real world. I mean I should go to work and have a conversation with people, this is the real world (...). —Sue

Moreover, not working limited creating a social network for 10 out of 16 women due to different reasons, such as not having friends from workplace, only becoming friend with husband's friends, not meeting new people around due to being away from the society, difficult to build a relationship with people out of workplace or university, no place to meet people due to not having a social role as a student or an employee.

I cannot talk to many people. I go to English classes, and I meet some friends. I go to church to do activities. If I could work, I would meet some colleagues and some people while handling business, but the situation here limits my right to do the work. —Lily

Not working created challenges in interaction of the participants with other people. For example, lack of having a social role in the US affected Dina's socialization with others as people asked her why she came to the US or asked her husband's information during the socialization. For Mariah, the fact that she has talents, but when it is restricted to use these talents, she was demotivated to talk about her status with others. For Sue, even if there were some opportunities that she could socialize with others through her husband's social network, the fact that she felt not belonged to her husband's community impacted her social life. For example, she said that her husbands' friends always talked about the scholarly

work and studying. For Rebecca, due to unemployment she had nothing to say, and she did not want to talk about housework with others, and she thought that it was better to not go to the social settings.

### ***Financial Limitations Caused by F-2 Visa***

Being prevented to work limited the income of the family, which affected the socialization of some participants. For example, Kelly and her husband said due to financial limitations they had to decline socializations with friends in outside.

For example, I cannot buy food. Everything we need, we should [manage] our budget about the expenses. We have to buy everything like thrift like donations. We have to live thriftly, frugal lifestyle which is not something that I want. I used to buy clothing, travel plans, grocery shopping and leisure activities all of that. If people go out, we would love but we can't because every dollar counts at the end of the month. We don't want bother others about our financial life. We don't say others about our financial life. —Kelly

Not only limited income affected socialization with friends outside, but it also negatively affected socializing with family members in the US or their home country. For example, Mariah was not able to have a reciprocal relationship with her family and relatives in the US as she believed that people saw her as a person who needed things, which she did not like it. This caused her to socialize less with others and not exchange gifts with others. Also, among these women there were three participants who could not visit their family and friends in their home country due to financial limitations. For example, Jessica mentioned that she could not support her family by meeting them and participating in the family events, such as hospital visits and funerals even if in her culture, extended families are important because of the expenses of travelling due to not working and limited income of the husband.

It is worth mentioning that the intersection of other immigration policies limited the spouses from visiting their family in their home country. For example, there are limited years of having a valid F-2 visa for Iranian participants, and they have to renew their entry visa after two years. Also, renewing the visa is only possible by requesting renewal from an American Embassy, so they needed to go to other countries to apply for the US entry visa which impacted their travel to their home country.

In addition, when the travel ban, the executive order by President Trump in 2017, was in effect, Rebecca mentioned that she could only go back to her home country once, and she could not invite her family. She mentioned that if she could see her family more, she could be happier, and it could positively affect her marital life. Rebecca mentioned that even today, without the travel ban, it's hard for her parents to visit her in the US because immigration officers could reject the cases

easily with no excuse. Also, it is hard for her to go back to her home country because there were people who were prevented to go back to the US after they traveled to their home country.

### **Central University and Local Institutions and the Social Integration of the F-2 Visa Holders**

The most important way that spouses of international students find friends was mostly through their husbands. Husbands were very helpful in social integration of their spouses not only by informing their wives about the events that are emailed to them, but also the husbands linked their wives to their social network and giving them suggestions in how to find friends. There were also other ways, such as becoming friend with neighbors and mutual friends, joining ethnic groups on social media, engaging in volunteer work, and talking to people in pregnancy class or grocery stores, which the participants used to find friends and socialize. However, the Central University, churches and university related offices try to integrate the international students and their spouses.

#### ***Churches, Central University and Related Organizations***

To learn about how Central University, churches and related organizations integrate spouses in society, taking a look at the resources available for these spouses was helpful. First, the Central University's housing for the married students has resources to integrate the families, such as a community center which people can gather and celebrate their cultural events. Although the architecture of the houses was not helpful in socializing with the neighbors, such as lack of balcony or porch, there are benches scattered around the houses, a park and a barbeque place to help the families to socialize. The university offers gardening plots in summer for the students to let them plant vegetables near the residential areas, which one of the spouses said it was helpful for her to engage with other families and socialize.

Second, the churches, Central University and its related offices offer to spouse of international students several resources mostly English classes and free events with few art, nutrition, and pregnancy classes. These classes provide some opportunities for spouses of international students to integrate into American society, learn the language and culture, gain information, socialize and find friends.

However, these free resources were not as efficient as they planned for social integration of the spouses. More specifically, based on the information in Fall 2021, from the secondary demographic data from International Students and Their Families Affairs Organization, an office related to Central University, not many spouses were using these classes and events. More specifically, in Fall semester, the number of international students using resources of International Students and Their Families Affairs Organization was 95 and the number of spouses of



international students was only 6. This is a very few numbers when looking at the total number of spouses of international students in this university in the same semester, Fall 2021, which was 201.

Based on the information from participant observation and interview, there were several factors preventing these women from using these free resources and subsequently preventing them from integrating in the society, which intersect with the F-2 visa regulations. Although all these reasons might not refer to all the participants, I found these factors affecting the ones who face difficulty in using the offered resources. For instance, being prevented to work decreased the income of the family because all the family members relied on one source of income of the husband. Limited source of income prevented or limited the spouses from using these resources, such as transportation, childcare system and gym.

### ***Transportation***

For using the resources offered by Central University, churches and the related offices, transportation is needed. Although Central University provides limited free transportation, those families who are not living in this residential area for international students or in the routes where, they do not have access to free buses, their mobility decreased; especially if they do not have a car. Although the positive thing regarding the state policy where the Central University is located is not requiring social security number for getting driving license, which some states have this law, not earning money by F-2 visa holders intersected with the COVID-19 caused increase in the price of cars and made it difficult for few families to buy a car in this study.

For instance, although Maria said that transportation was a life saver, in terms of the expenses of transportation she said “It reduces my ability to spend on other things. When I want to commute, I am conservative to where to go. It restricts mobility.” No wonder half of the participants mentioned using free buses as needed resources. Other resources, such as gym membership also mentioned by three women which prevent them from joining sport activities which could facilitates their social integration and socializing.

### ***Limitations in Using Childcare***

Not having access to childcare services can affect social integration of mother F-2 visa holders negatively as they are not able to join these classes and events when their child cannot go to public schools yet. Some free English classes may offer childcare services like the ones in the churches. However, Sarah mentioned that she could not join most of these free English classes and events though she liked to and got bored at home because not all classes provide childcare. Also, there is a long waiting list for childcare centers apart from expenses, and Sarah could access a daycare after nine months. In terms of the expenses of childcare, Tina said that she was able for two months to send her child, but it was too expensive, and could not afford it. However, at that time, she needed a break. she

took medications for depression. Although the university has some scholarships for using daycares, the mothers who needed daycare were not aware of it due to lack of outreach to the F-2 visa holders.

### ***Lack of Efficient Outreach***

Speaking of lack of outreach, one reason in reducing the social integration of F-2 visa holders in terms of available free resources was the lack of efficient outreach. The first reason is that the emails about resources are sent to the students first. This barrier intersect with the immigration status of the spouses as the university knows international students, not their F-2 spouses.

I usually find friends like events, which my husband tell[s] me about, church events. It was sending for my husband by the university. They said there is an activity for international students or spouses to make a friend, then I told him, so I went to make a friend. —Dina

## **DISCUSSION**

Structural vulnerability is what Holmes (2011) considers as when social structures are the main reasons for suffering among immigrants, which affects their health. In terms of the participants in this study, F-2 visa regulations threaten the wellbeing of the F-2 visa holders in terms of their social integration and consequently their health by making them vulnerable. Compared to language or cultural barriers, F-2 visa regulations had the most significant effects on the social integration and building social network of female F-2 visa holders which is contrary to the study of Kim (2012) on Korean spouses of international students in the US. For example, in this study, cultural and language barriers were not significant obstacles in social interaction of female F-2 visa holders.

Kim (2012), highlighted the significant effects of power, personal characteristics and volunteering in helping Korean women's social integration, adaptation, finding cross-group friends, enjoying their life and feel belonged to American society. However, this article found that while having community, personal characteristics, finding opportunities to socialize and having free time could help preventing these women from social isolation, it was not true for all participants. In fact, not only there are some limitations in doing volunteer activities for spouses of international students, such as not being allowed to work in student organizations or dog shelters, not all spouses who did volunteer work mentioned that volunteer job helped them finding friends.

In fact, for the F-2 visa holders in this study, due to restrictions to work or studying at the university as a full-time student limited building social network. As Shao-Kuo (2001) mentioned, when the wives of international students are independent, and they are progressing, their social interaction would be enhanced

because of boosting of their self-esteem which affects their attitude towards the external world.

Furthermore, being prevented from working affected the budget of the family due to relying only on the husband's limited salary. Consequently, the financial limitations prevented F-2 visa holders from not only joining social activities which needed money, having reciprocal relationships, but most importantly not using resources, such as public transportation, childcare and gym limited them in pursuing social activities organized for them in the city. This is also in line with previous studies about spouses of international students that highlighted limited self-achievement, economic problems, and lack of transportation as some of the problems experienced by spouses of international students (Cho et al., 2005). In fact, studies show that having an income and a car can help female immigrants to engage and interact in the society and positively improve their emotional wellbeing (Dossa, 2002; Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014; Vega et al., 1991).

Contrary to what Shao-Kuo (2001) said, that universities register international students and universities are not responsible for their dependent spouses, Central University and the university related offices try to integrate spouses of international students in the society. De Trinidad Young et al. (2018) says that although federal policies indicate who can enter the United States or become a permanent resident, state policy is very important in allowing non-citizens to use the resources. However, this article highlights the importance of federal immigration policy because even if there is an inclusive policy in the state or in the universities like Central University, still F-2 visa holders face difficulties in accessing resources, such as public transportation and childcare due to not being allowed work and earning money.

In addition, lack of an efficient outreach to the non-student spouses due to not being a student makes the F-2 visa holders unaware of the resources. This is in line with what Holmes (2011) pointed out, as one of the reasons that immigrants become vulnerable is due to power structures and existence of power hierarchy among different immigrant categories which privilege one category over another categories of immigrants. In this study the power hierarchy in immigrant categories give priority to international students to receive the email rather than their non-student spouse. Thus, the F-2 spouses become less socially integrated and more isolated from the society.

When it comes to the relationship with family members, financial limitations affected not only relationships in the US, but also made these spouses unable to go to visit their family and friends back home because of the travel expenses. However, if these women could have a job, it was more likely that they could pay their travel expenses. It is worth noting that structural vulnerability for some nationalities starts before entering to the US, especially when F-2 visa regulations intersect with other restrictive policies, such as travel bans and limited expiration dates for entry visa, countries like Iran. For instance, the intersection of immigration policies and their nationalities prevented Iranian F-2 visa holders from inviting their family or visiting their family, which created unhappiness in

these women. That is in line with what Duncan (2015) says that immigrants before, during, and after immigration are vulnerable due to the structures in their home country, at the border, and living in the US, which affects them negatively.

F-2 visa regulations create lack of freedom to work, which to some extent is in line with a study about Latino immigrants as they experienced social isolation in the US (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014); however, the lack of freedom for Latino women was due to the lack of control of their time and money as they needed to go to work and pay expenses, subsequently causing them having limited time to socialize with their social ties. In the case of F-2 visa holders in this study, not working was the reason for integrating less in the society and building social network.

Instead of building social networks, the female F-2 visa holders in this study found friends through their husbands and English classes and events in churches, which is partly in line with Meadows, Thurston and Melton (2001) who mention that religious institutions helped female immigrants by providing activities for them and helping them to build social network similar to the female F-2 visa holders in this study. However, not all the participants mentioned the importance of religious institutions in helping them to integrate in the society.

Even other factors like smallness of the city and COVID-19 were not significant factors among these women affecting their social integration compared to the F-2 visa regulations, can indicate that their social life prior to COVID-19 and after was not very different in the US. This study is another example of focusing on structural powers in society, such as immigration policies, in order to underline what threatens the immigrant's well-being instead of focusing on the immigrants themselves. This study has limitations as it did not include the narratives of F-2 visa holders who could not speak English, so it is important to include their voices and insights in the future studies.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

By looking into how F-2 visa regulations affect the social life of spouses, this article invites future researchers to do research on health outcomes of living with F-2 visa among spouses of international students because social support and socioeconomic of the immigrants is linked to immigrants' health and immigration laws affect the level of belonging of immigrants to a nation (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). The findings in this article show that F-2 visa regulations negatively affect the social integration of F-2 visa holders and consequently affect their marital life, personality, confidence and mental health. It is important to have a more flexible immigration policy to protect them, such as allowing F-2 visa holders to work in order to let these women integrate into society which can help them to have more social support and more financial freedom to use the resources, such as childcare, transportation and gym. Shao-Kuo (2001) mentioned that spouses of international students are an invisible minority, and it is hard to access them; however, universities can get non-student spouses' email addresses when

they register the students so they can integrate F-2 visa holders in the social events by mentioning other local offices and resources. This study only included participants who speak English; thus, future research should integrate spouses of international students who speak other languages to show their experience in terms of integrating into society. This was another study encouraging scholars to shift their attention from the immigrants to structural barriers, such as immigration policy when it comes to finding reasons for limiting immigrants' social integration and health.

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