



Foreign-born women play a key role in the U.S. workforce

by: Andrea Gallagher

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Research explores how immigrant women, particularly those with a bachelor's degree, have impacted the labor force.

Herita Akamah moved to the United States from Cameroon in 2005 when she was 21 years old. The main reason was to attend graduate school, which would then enable her to have a career that would provide for herself and her family.

“My parents have always made it clear that education, the highest level of education, is the key to my financial stability and consequently well-being,” she said. “We lived in extreme frugality just so that we could go to school. My parents sponsored me up to my B.A. and then I moved to the U.S., as the next logical step was my master’s.”

She ended up achieving that and more, but it wasn’t easy. She had to overcome many obstacles on her quest for a master’s degree, including the various grading systems that come into play when people move from one country to another.

“I could not get an assistantship right away because the school was unsure about how my academic performance in a foreign university would translate to an American university,” she explained. “Grading systems differ widely across countries but thankfully, I was able to prove myself and was then able to get the assistantship.”

Akamah is now a tenured professor of accounting at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She and many other foreign-born women across the country are making an impact in the American workforce. The topic was examined this year in Kansas City Fed research by Senior Economist Didem Tüzemen and Associate Economist Emily Pollard. Their April *Economic Bulletin*—“Foreign-born Women Have Driven the Recent Increase in Prime-Age Women in the Labor Force”—is available at [KansasCityFed.org/research](https://www.kansascityfed.org/research).

According to Tüzemen and Pollard, the share of people working or actively looking for work declined dramatically among prime-age individuals (ages 25 to 54) during the pandemic-led recession. From February to April 2020, women, especially those without a bachelor’s degree, were disproportionately affected by job losses and left the labor force. Since mid-2020, however, women’s labor force participation has recovered alongside a strengthening labor market, with prime-age women’s labor force participation rate reaching an all-time high.

“We wanted to dig deeper into how immigration might have played a role,” Pollard said. “We found that foreign-born women experienced larger labor force participation rate gains than U.S.-born women and drove the recent increase in the labor force of prime-age women. To the best of our knowledge, we were the first researchers to study the effect of immigration on the rise in prime-age women’s labor force participation after the pandemic.”

According to the American Immigration Council, there are more than 23 million female immigrants in the United States, and they play a valuable role in U.S. society and the economy. Immigrant women come from all over the world and outnumber immigrant men. They’re more likely than men to come to the United States through the family-based immigration system and are more likely to become U.S. citizens. More than one-third of immigrant women aged 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Overcoming obstacles

Akamah was able to earn her master’s in accounting at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, then she worked as an accountant in Denver. However, when she decided to pursue a doctorate, she came across more obstacles. Fortunately, she was able to gain admittance to the University of Oklahoma.

“I got a Ph.D. because I had decided I wanted to pursue a career in academia,” she said. “The vastly different grading systems across countries was a problem at this stage again because my undergrad GPA seemed low. Nevertheless, a great university decided to overlook that.”

Mirabel Forteh moved to the United States from Cameroon in 2005 when her husband relocated, and she eventually earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and Doctor of Nursing degree. They settled in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and she now works as a nurse practitioner in cardiology at the Stillwater Medical Center Cardiology Clinic. She said that most foreign women come to the United States because there are more opportunities, both academically and professionally.

“It was an opportunity to advance myself both financially and to achieve what I call, my self-actualization,” Forteh said, offering advice to others wanting to live the American dream. “Stay focused, go for a degree or profession that you enjoy and can pay the bills. Remember to enjoy life in between.”

It wasn’t an easy path for Forteh either, as she needed help with childcare, and took advantage of the Early Head Start program, which is a free, federally funded program that provides early childhood education, health, nutrition and other services to low-income parents. It would’ve been beneficial, she said, to have received help on acclimating to the American culture, speaking the language, and figuring out how to apply and pay for college.

“I had to talk to family and friends to figure out what they did or could have done if they were given a chance to do it all over again,” she said.

Kelly Ross used to teach English as a second language to new Americans living in Lincoln. Seeing a need for more assistance, she created ECHO Collective, which helps refugee and immigrant women overcome barriers they might face in rebuilding their lives in the United States. ECHO helps to connect and empower refugee and immigrant women by providing opportunities. A new pilot program aims to help with their education.

“Accessing higher education in the United States as a new American can be difficult, especially if you are a woman and married with children,” Ross said. “ECHO Collective is partnering with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln this summer to pilot a certificate program that is specifically for New American women who wish to obtain formal education regarding entrepreneurship without committing two to four years and thousands of dollars to a degree that isn't the right fit for their lifestyle, dreams and budget.”

Capitalizing on opportunities

Ross said that in her experiences at ECHO Collective, women often are making more money than their spouses, further demonstrating a community need for an organization like hers.

“We are noticing that the businesses started by our entrepreneurs are the sole source of income for the family,” Ross said.

“Gender roles are flipped, and the women in our programs are the breadwinners for their households. Since we began in 2020, 49% of the women in our programs are the primary income-earner for their families.”

Jahena Cervantes moved to Nebraska in 2016 from Veracruz, Mexico. When she found out an organization called Lincoln Literacy could teach her English and provide childcare at the same time, she enrolled in their online and in-person classes. Once she was more comfortable with her English-speaking skills, she took entrepreneurship classes at ECHO Collective.

As a result, she said she feels more confident and empowered to see her potential as an entrepreneur, wife, mother and friend.

“In May I graduated from ECHO Collective, and today I own my own business,” Cervantes said. “My business is a cleaning service to businesses and residential. I am currently starting out, but my goal is to grow this business, expand and be able to employ all those people who need work and together achieve our dreams. I feel very proud of myself, of who I am and what I am achieving because right now I know things are hard but not impossible.”

Lincoln Literacy has been around for more than 50 years in the capital city. The organization has a staff of less than 50 but relies on 185 volunteers who help teach English to thousands of students at all levels of fluency. They also help with career

development and even driving with two driving simulators. They help with childcare and transportation as well, so there are fewer barriers for students.

“The key to success is we meet people where they are,” said Bryan Seck, executive director. “No one has to be here; people choose to be here. That’s our magic. What do you want to do? What are your goals? We are able to build trust with people.”

According to Tuzemen and Pollard’s findings, by February 2024 almost 1.8 million more prime-age women were in the workforce compared with the 2019 average. While foreign-born women make up only a little more than a fifth of the population of prime-age women, on net, they were responsible for nearly two-thirds of the workforce increase, with half of the total increase coming from foreign-born women with a bachelor’s degree.

“Foreign-born women have played an important role in the recent increase in prime-age women in the labor force, at least partially, thanks to recent immigration,” Pollard said.

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Media



Jahena Cervantes, from Veracruz, Mexico, took entrepreneurship classes and now owns a cleaning business.