

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Gender and Identity in a Community of Working Class Latina Mothers

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The individual and social experiences of working class Latina mothers and their families, before and after migrating, are mostly invisible to the larger public. What is widely known comes from the popular media, where immigrants are often seen as a threat. This study presents the stories of twenty working class Latino immigrant mothers; some of them documented, some undocumented. Through these women's accounts, the study provides personal portraits of the female immigrants' lives and experiences: their motivations for coming to the US; their struggles with the language, jobs, partners, racial relations; their small triumphs; and how these experiences have impacted their identities and gender relations.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to describe the effect of the migration experience on the lives of twenty working class Latina mothers. The participants were from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Colombia; and now live in Mid-Size City, located in the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area. The women were between 20 and 65 years of age and had been in the US 3 to 15 years.

The study was guided by a central question—Does the migration experience affect gender ideologies, gender relations, and the identity of working class Latina

mothers in Mid-Size City?—and six subquestions that addressed the key themes of the study. The data were gathered through participant observation, semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews, and a focus group interview. The identified themes were analyzed within the theoretical framework of Multiracial Feminism, a perspective that places the experiences of women of color in the US at the intersection of different systems of domination, in particular gender, class and race. This interaction of structures is “the matrix of domination” (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1997 p.327).

Findings show that migration has introduced favorable changes to gender relations for most of the Latino immigrant mothers, but that the changes are not significant enough to transform the gender ideologies and patriarchal systems within which these women live. The data also show that migration has had a significant impact on transforming the identity of the participants. More than half perceived the changes in their self image as positive, feeling that their new role as wage earners brought them a sense of empowerment and autonomy; but eight of the twenty felt that migration had impacted their identity in a negative way, leaving them without friends or language to communicate. Finally, the findings suggest that in addition to gender, class and race, two other structures, undocumented status and language barriers, must be added to the “matrix of domination” when discussing working class Latino immigrant women. Together these systems stifle their chances for occupational advancement and upward mobility.