

The Immigration Experiences of Salvadoran Women
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Since the 1980s, Salvadoran immigrants have been recognized as among the most significant new Latino groups in the United States. Though the 2000 Census counted about 700,000 Salvadorans living in the U.S., social research groups estimate the actual Salvadoran population at over one million (Cordova, 75). And while Salvadorans as a group have achieved greater visibility due to national debate on immigration policy, little attention has been paid to Salvadoran women immigrants in the U.S., whose numbers have been increasing and who have played a pivotal role in the establishment of Salvadoran American communities. Their experiences provide a vital link between Salvadoran and American cultures, as evidenced in their evolving attitudes towards social and especially gender relations. Careful study of their particular history and immigration process shows that working class Salvadoran women experience economic, political, and social changes that have a powerful effect on their patterns of gender relations.

A clear sense of Salvadoran history and culture is essential to understanding the shift in social ideas that Salvadoran women experienced in the U.S. Though major Salvadoran immigration began in the 1980s as a result of the bloody civil war, Salvadoran migration to the U.S. and the reasons behind it began long before that. As immigrant Armando L. explained:

Some people say that it was a twelve-year war that we suffered through.
I say the war lasted at least fifty or even a hundred and fifty years. We
have a rich and tragic and even violent, and very sad history – so we
can't forget it, it's in all of us, in our veins. (Menjivar, 37)

Soon after its establishment as an independent republic in 1840, El Salvador developed a coffee-based economy that was controlled by the elite Fourteen Families, the richest families in El Salvador, who also ran the country as an oligarchy (Gorkin, 340). Coffee production profoundly affected the country and one of its byproducts was the creation of a culture of migration. The elite planters created private militias and rural police to expel peasants from the desirable coffee-producing lands of western El Salvador, thereby causing a massive peasant migration from the west to the northern and eastern parts of El Salvador. Additionally, coffee production introduced

new cyclical migration patterns, since peasants migrated to the coffee-producing lands to work during harvest season (Hamilton, 22-23).

New coffee-production patterns also affected gender relations, which have traditionally been as rigidly stratified as class in El Salvador. Since its colonial period, Salvadoran gender relations have been dominated by *machismo* (patriarchy), a concept that Cordova concisely illustrates through its ideal of “a hard working man who is allowed to have open relations with many women and may resort to aggressive and violent behavior to protect what is his” (20). The new cyclical migration patterns that coffee production introduced in the late 1870s led to a new social development – the rise of free unions and a resulting increase in the births of illegitimate children. By the 1930s, 60% of all births in El Salvador were illegitimate and the marriage rate was 3.6 per thousand (Menjivar, 42). The men’s constant moving for work and the low wages they earned caused a marked increase of women-headed households and women’s participation in public life. Salvadoran sociologists hypothesize that this institution of cyclical migration, along with high-density population and the traditional attitude of *machismo*, have contributed to the widespread phenomenon of *la casa chica* (the mini-home), in which a man has more than one household and simultaneously supports his several families (Cordova, 20).

Coffee also fostered international immigration, both to and from El Salvador. Foreign elites – mostly Europeans, with some Christian Arabs and Americans – who became investors in the coffee trade sometimes settled in El Salvador and became assimilated into the traditional elites (Hamilton, 24). The Salvadorans who emigrated mostly did so to the United States and were part of the first Central American migration wave, from 1870 to 1930. This wave was initially comprised of elites negotiating coffee exportation; they traveled along the Pacific coast and established the beginnings of a Salvadoran community in San Francisco, the center of business with American coffee companies such as MJB and Folgers (Cordova, 61). Gradually, working class Salvadorans migrated to work in the California coffee industry, as well.

The second Central American migration wave, from 1930 to 1941, was prompted by the economic collapse of the late 1920s, when the international price of coffee fell by 62% (Menjivar, 39). The collapse left the oligarchy vulnerable; fearing unrest, they allied with the military and funded a military coup d’etat in 1931, which installed the ruthless General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez as ruler for the next thirteen years (Menjivar, 39-40). When economic depression led indigenous people, peasants, and students to stage an uprising, Gen.

Martinez responded with La Matanza (“The Massacre”) of 1932, a two-month terror campaign during which 30,000 people were killed (Menjivar, 40). Though a powerful inspiration for later revolutionary movements, this event – along with continued persecution of “Communists” – effectively silenced the opposition. The second migration wave was mostly made up of middle- and upper-class progressives, such as intellectuals, teachers, and labor organizers, who fled El Salvador because of political persecution. They helped establish Salvadoran communities in the S.F. Bay Area, New York, and Los Angeles, where men worked as longshoremen or in construction and women worked in the textile and shipping industries (Cordova, 61-62).

During World War II and the postwar period, El Salvador experienced economic modernization due to diversification of its agricultural exports – especially cotton and sugar – and some industrialization (Hamilton, 26). The modernization created many new industrial jobs, which caused a major internal migration from rural to urban areas, with major cities like San Salvador attracting nearly three-quarters of new migrants (Hamilton, 26). Salvadorans also migrated internationally: many pursued opportunities in the Panama Canal Zone, where some workers earned contracts with American companies that took them to Los Angeles or San Francisco (Cordova, 62). During World War II, Salvadorans took advantage of the high demand for labor and found jobs in the shipping and textile industries, as well as naval yards – these immigrants made up the third migration wave (1941-1950), which was distinguished by its high rate of return migration. Many Salvadoran immigrants lost their jobs to returning servicemen and returned to contribute the skills they developed abroad to the developing Salvadoran economy (Cordova, 63).

Though men dominated early international migration, Salvadoran women migrated to the cities within El Salvador in larger numbers (Menjivar, 48). Menjivar relates greater migration flows to the three connected characteristics of poor Salvadoran families: high rates of free unions, illegitimate children, and female headship of households. By the late 1950s, 50% of unions were free unions, while one-third of urban and one-fifth of rural families were headed by women (Menjivar, 47). This led to increased female participation in the paid workforce, which was facilitated by extended family’s contributions to the household (especially through child care). Since single women were not attractive to landholders as laborers or renters, they were effectively excluded from agricultural work and had to seek urban employment opportunities.

Women primarily worked as domestics, street and market vendors, and factory workers (Menjivar, 48). Though the old social ideas remained, social realities were rapidly changing.

The 1960s was a period of continuing industrialization and closer relations with the United States. The oligarchic government successfully attracted foreign investment by reducing tariffs through the creation of the Central American Common Market. American, along with some European and Japanese, investment contributed to the development of the Salvadoran assembly and processing industries (Hamilton, 26). Increased business ties along with the passage of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 (which granted El Salvador a quota that it previously did not have) contributed to the fourth wave of migration: the dramatic increase of Salvadoran migration to the U.S. from 45,000 during the 1950s to more than 100,000 during the 1960s (Menjivar, 54). As Hamilton pointed out, a Salvadoran worker could transfer the skills that he learned in a foreign-funded Salvadoran assembly plant to U.S. companies, while a domestic worker for a U.S. company or its government could work for similar or even the same families in the U.S. (29). Growing ties meant expanding work opportunities, leading to the establishment of new Salvadoran communities in Houston, New Jersey, New Orleans, and Washington D.C. (Cordova, 64).

During the 1970s, the Salvadoran economy showed the mixed results of modernization. Though the country had experienced rapid economic growth and an increase in big city job opportunities, many peasants and subsistence farmers found themselves displaced as their lands were seized to fund government growth (Hamilton, 28). The external shocks of skyrocketing oil prices and rampant inflation exacerbated the growing economic crisis, which in turn led to growing social protest. Influenced by growing leftist movements across Central America, Salvadoran peasants, urban workers, teachers, and students organized strikes and protest marches. The government and military, controlled by the elites, responded with growing repression and the creation of paramilitary death squads, which targeted anyone suspected of leftist political activism (Hamilton, 30). Hamilton and Menjivar cite the establishment's unwillingness to respond to popular demands as pivotal in the outbreak of civil war (Hamilton, 30-31; Menjivar, 49-50).

The period of the largest Salvadoran migration, the fifth wave (1975-1990), spanned the beginning unrest and the worst of the civil war. The rich who sensed trouble left early, in the late 1970s; unlike the less privileged, they avoided the trauma of witnessing the extreme violence

of the early 1980s (Reimers, 133). In 1981 guerrilla organizations united in the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), named after a Communist leader killed in La Matanza of 1932, and began an armed campaign against the military. It is estimated that close to 25% of the population was displaced by the war; by 1990, migration to the U.S. had quintupled to more than 565,000 (Cordova, 72). The Reagan administration, which was funding Salvadoran military forces, refused to grant Salvadoran immigrants refugee status; this shifted Salvadoran migration from mostly legal before 1979 to predominantly illegal thereafter (Cordova, 69). After twelve years of war and over 80,000 killed, a U.N.-brokered peace accord was signed in 1992 between the guerrillas and the government, which established the two as political parties, the right-wing ARENA and the leftist FMLN (Cordova, 16).

Salvadoran women's differing experiences across the classes were clearly illustrated during this brutal, divisive war. Maria M, of the Salvadoran peasant class, spent her teenage years fighting the military in the mountains among guerrilla members of both sexes; her mother, Dolores, supported the guerrillas by assisting with vital needs like food (Gorkin, 133). Though middle-class Dulce R. disapproved of economic injustice, she also disapproved of the FMLN's armed resistance and remained uninvolved in the conflict (Gorkin, 251-252). High-class Cecilia N. bemoaned the post-war abolition of the National Guard, which was known to massacre peasants, claiming that "there is no security now, neither for the rich nor poor" (Gorkin, 62). These women's contrasting experiences and perspectives show how El Salvador's history of extreme class stratification has impeded any unified feminist movement across classes, which helps explain why the prevailing *machismo* attitude – so deeply rooted that abortion was criminalized as well as banned in 1998 (Hitt 2) – continues to oppress Salvadoran women.

Since the 1980s, migration from El Salvador has been increasingly working class and female (Cordova, 78). Political turmoil during the war and the post-war period's persistent poverty, natural disasters, and gang-related crime have distinguished Salvadoran women immigrants as falling somewhere between being refugees and being economically-motivated immigrants. The key to their increasing numbers in the U.S. has been social networks; as Doña Tulita, an elderly working class Salvadoran immigrant, explains:

Now everyone comes here. Tell me, what Salvadoran, whether he's rich or poor, doesn't have a relative or at least a friend in the United States?
No one. The whole world is here. Before...only those with money could come...
It was a luxury; now it's a need. (Menjívar, 55)

Entire families invest their life savings and go into debt to send a single person to the United States, especially if the immigrant is illegally crossing the border and must pay for the services of a *coyote* (Gammage, 3). Although, like Mexican women, Salvadoran women make up the majority of the legal migration of their group, significant numbers still come illegally (Reimers, 137). Women who illegally cross face the greatest challenges, as they are overcharged by coyotes and run a very high risk of robbery and sexual assault (Poggio, 32). But interestingly, based on her survey of Salvadoran women who had immigrated illegally, Poggio learned that for many of them, the entire experience marked the beginning of their changing concepts of gender and self. The process of making the life-changing decision to emigrate, feeling the responsibility of bearing their entire families' hopes, and surviving the harrowing ordeal of sneaking across three borders (Guatemala, Mexico, then the U.S.) gave them a feeling of having "a protagonist's role in their own lives" (Poggio, 40-41).

The social networks established by the preceding waves of Salvadoran migration to the U.S. direct where a newcomer will settle; approximately 80% of Salvadoran immigrants in San Francisco received help from friends and relatives in the U.S. during their migration process (Reimers, 139). Most meet these established contacts in major, economically dynamic cities that already have established Salvadoran community: Los Angeles, which has the largest Salvadoran population in the U.S; Washington D.C., where much of the Salvadoran immigration was spearheaded by women pursuing jobs in child care and cleaning services; San Francisco, where the first Salvadoran American community was established in the late 19th century; and some areas in the south with newer, growing Salvadoran communities, such as North Carolina, Atlanta, and Houston (Reimers, 139; Cordova, 80-81). As with many other groups of working class, undocumented immigrants, the newly-arrived tend to share cramped living quarters with family or friends in ethnic enclaves.

Social networks serve many functions; they can help a newly-arrived immigrant find jobs, a place to live, and education about life in the new country. Menjivar posits that networks tend to be "gendered" and that women derive different benefits from their networks than men do theirs (157); the differences can initially be felt through job opportunities. Salvadoran immigrants have high labor force participation rates, with 80% for men and 62% for women, both higher than the national average for all groups (Reimers, 139). Although Salvadoran men's social networks help them find better-paying jobs, the women's networks have the

complementary effects of helping them find jobs more easily, teaching them about women's rights and the services available to women, and helping them create their own social circles (Menjivar, 165, 192). This is partly due to the more interactive nature of Salvadoran women's responsibilities both at home and at work. As wives/mothers who earn less than men, they find themselves in charge of seeking out community resources to help fulfill their and their families' needs (Menjivar, 192). This leads to a greater range of contacts and diverse sources of information about opportunities; Menjivar cites the example of Amparo A. Amparo's mother took her to a food pantry; while waiting in line for food, they networked with women who told them about how to legalize their immigration status by obtaining Temporary Protected Status. During another visit to the same pantry, Amparo gave other women advice on how to obtain good nutrition while pregnant through the WIC program (Menjivar, 173). A respondent in Poggio's study conveyed how impressed she was with American society upon learning from a friend that "if you're in danger of being domestically abused, you can call 911 and the police will come" (Poggio, 37). These social networks help Salvadoran immigrant women maximize the resources available to them and increase their independence – whether legal or undocumented, married or single.

Another source of socio-economic empowerment for Salvadoran women is through *remesas* (remittances) back home. Remittances are a huge part of the modern-day Salvadoran economy: the Central Bank of El Salvador estimates that approximately \$1.6 billion flows annually from the United States to El Salvador (Reimers, 140). In 2004, approximately 22% of Salvadoran households received cash remittances, with the figure increasing to 50% when remittances in other forms are included (Gammage, 4). And while Salvadoran men sent the majority of remittances at 58.4%, proportionately, almost double the number of female-led households received remittances (33%) than male-led households did (17%); Salvadoran women also tended to send back remittances more consistently than men (Gammage, 4). This adds both to the Salvadoran immigrant woman's self-esteem as provider and to her prestige back home, since the Salvadoran economy is essentially dependent on this help from abroad.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the shift in Salvadoran immigrant gender dynamics has been the cultural backlash against the women's empowerment. Menjivar cites examples of this phenomenon by quoting resentful Salvadoran immigrant men, such as Don David:

At first, I gave her anything she wanted, but she's capricious. She wants

this and that. You know, women become too important here...they want more and more. In El Salvador women are content with what one gives them, but here no. They demand things...I don't give her anything now. Besides, from what I can see, she earns good money and knows a lot of people. In case she's in need, she can go to them. (Menjivar, 169)

She also quotes a younger but similarly disgruntled Salvadoran man, Edwin M:

[They're] independent and loose because they think they can do it all on their own...they start working, they have money to go out with their friends...they become spoiled. (169)

Some women retort that while they increase their household contributions, Salvadoran immigrant men decrease theirs and become irresponsible, with some even turning to alcoholism (Menjivar, 166-168). Although there is limited space here to explore these effects, it is abundantly clear that Salvadoran immigrant women's socio-economic empowerment can also cause new social problems within their communities by skewing traditional gender dynamics.

Clearly, working class Salvadoran women have experienced profound changes in almost all aspects of their lives by deciding to immigrate to the United States. We can appreciate the true profundity of those changes when examining their previous experiences in the context of their own country's history and culture, especially in gender relations, where Salvadoran and American views remain so different. What initially inspired me to research this topic was reading David Reimer's account of the Salvadoran immigrant experience in *Other Immigrants*. He examined it through an inevitably American point-of-view: how Salvadorans were forced to accept the most undesirable jobs at pay below minimum wage. Everything was true, I thought, but he was missing an important point: coming to the U.S. signified a huge step forward, not just for the immigrant but for the family she left behind, too. The working class Salvadoran woman left behind the stratified society and limited economic opportunities of her home country to pursue better opportunities in a relatively more egalitarian country – opportunities which would enable her to improve her family's quality of life several times over. Salvadorans are known as hard-working, resilient people; by learning about their past – the hardships they have experienced as well as their struggle to persevere – we are better able to see the triumphs in their tragedies and, instead of simply feeling sorry for them, can bring a more informed, humanized, respectful perspective to the American immigration debate.

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¹ Translation: Female Migration to the United States of America: Change in Family and Gender Relations as a Result of Migration.