

“We Are The Ones Who Are Out in Front’:
Women’s Leadership in the Immigrant Rights Movement”

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A striking feature of the contemporary U.S. immigrant rights movement is the extensive presence of women in formal leadership roles. Women are not only highly visible among grassroots and mid-level leaders but are also conspicuous as executive directors of prominent immigrant rights organizations and other high-level positions. In this regard, the immigrant rights movement is an anomaly, for in most other U.S. social movements and the organizations linked to them (apart from those focused on women’s rights or family issues) men typically dominate peak-level leadership roles.

The 21st century immigrant rights movement is national in scope, as the massive street marches of 2006 revealed (Voss and Bloemraad 2011), and prominent female immigrant rights leaders can be found throughout the United States. We focus here on their role in Los Angeles, where the movement first emerged and where a disproportionate share of its organizations and advocates are headquartered. Home to the nation’s single largest concentration of unauthorized immigrants, southern California has the movement’s deepest base of popular support. And unlike regions with more diverse foreign-born populations, the immigrant community in the L.A. metropolitan area is highly cohesive, due to its relative ethnic and linguistic homogeneity: Mexicans and Central Americans make up the majority of the area’s foreign-born population (author tabulations of the American Community Survey 2009), and an even greater proportion of its unauthorized population (Fortuny, Capps and Passel 2007). In recent years, moreover, Los Angeles has become the nation’s leading laboratory of immigrant labor organizing, especially among Latinos (Milkman 2006; Milkman, Bloom and Narro 2010).

The L.A. immigrant rights movement is highly decentralized, with a rich organizational infrastructure. It includes four distinct segments: (a) service-sector labor unions with substantial foreign-born memberships; (b) established immigrant hometown associations and ethnic organizations; (c) newer community-based organizations, including “worker centers” as well as umbrella immigrant rights organizations that function as coalition-builders; and (d) student immigrant rights groups. The nature and extent of women’s leadership varies considerably among these four segments, as we discuss below. That variation enriches our analysis, helping to expose the dynamics of women’s leadership in the immigrant rights movement as a whole. Our inquiry focuses specifically on Latinas, who predominate among the movement’s high-level female leaders in Los Angeles.

The basic goals of the contemporary immigrant rights movement are twofold. On the one hand, it is a civil rights movement, seeking a path to legal status

and other fundamental rights for the nation's unauthorized immigrants. On the other hand, it is a labor movement, in the broadest sense of the term, promoting economic advancement for immigrants and their children.

Yet, the prominence of women among peak-level leaders in the immigrant rights movement differentiates it from other U.S. civil rights and labor movements, in which women are typically limited to intermediate and lower level positions, while men monopolize top leadership positions (see Robnett 1996, Milkman 2007). In earlier movements involving the Latino community, similarly, men comprised the overwhelming majority of top-level leaders, as for example in the United Farm Workers and in the Chicano movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

Why is the immigrant rights movement different? We propose a three-pronged explanation. First, an ample *supply* of female leaders has been generated by the migration process itself – which, as many commentators have noted, often improves the status of female immigrants and draws them into the public sphere. Secondly, because the immigrant rights movement is relatively new, and has experienced dramatic growth since the late 1980s, it has generated extensive *demand* for new leadership – and, critically, this occurred in the context of a late 20th century political culture that is broadly supportive of gender equity. Finally, a third factor that has contributed to the rise of women's leadership is the *feminist consciousness* of immigrant women leaders themselves. Although rarely articulated publicly, feminism has served as a vital resource for many immigrant women as they rose into leadership roles, helping them overcome a variety of obstacles.

Gender and Migration

The sociological literature on the gender dynamics of immigration from Latin America to the United States offers a starting point for our analysis. A key finding in that literature is that, despite the many difficulties associated with the migration process, it tends to improve women's economic and social status relative to that of their male counterparts, generating what Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994: 196) characterizes as “a general trend toward gender egalitarianism” in the Latino immigrant community (see also Pedraza 1991, Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, Simon 1992, Pessar 1999, Foner 1999).

That trend is driven primarily by the dynamics of female labor force participation. The employment opportunities that Latin American immigrants (of both genders) find in the United States are generally superior to those in the sending countries – indeed this is the single most common reason for migration. Once having arrived in the United States, most Latina immigrants seek work outside the household for reasons of economic necessity, generating a female labor force

participation rate much higher than that in their countries of origin.¹ Although initially paid work often is conceived as an extension of domesticity rather than a challenge to it (Segura 1994), over time it provides immigrant women with greater economic independence and freedom of movement than most enjoyed prior to migration, and also often increases their power within immigrant households.

As in the U.S. labor market as a whole, job segregation by gender produces different employment patterns for Latino and Latina immigrants, and distinctive workplace cultures as well. Latino immigrant men, especially those employed in male-dominated sectors like construction, often find a reservoir of support among their co-workers for patriarchal gender norms, or what Robert Smith (2006: ch. 5) calls “ranchero masculinity,” further reinforced in all-male leisure activities like soccer or drinking in bars. By contrast, Latina immigrants disproportionately find employment in interactive service jobs, where they gain greater exposure to “American” ideals of gender equality. Many female immigrants embrace those ideals, albeit in complex and ambivalent ways (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1998, Menjivar 1999, Zentgraf 2002).

Although they typically earn more per hour than their female counterparts, Latino immigrant men often have less stable employment. Thus Latina immigrants who work longer and more regular hours may accumulate earnings equal to or exceeding those of their husbands and fathers. Even those with lower earnings have far more economic independence than they did prior to migration (Pessar 1999). They enjoy greater freedom of physical movement as well – travelling to work, taking their children to school, shopping, and so forth – all of which place them “outside of traditional normative expectations and squarely ‘in the street.’” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 194) As Zentgraf (2002: 637) observes in her study of Salvadoran female immigrants in Los Angeles, this greater spatial mobility is itself empowering, providing “a sense of freedom... a breaking down of gender-related cultural and social roles that [had] kept them tightly regulated and watched.”

Both Latino and Latina immigrants enjoy expanded access to secondary and post-secondary educational opportunities in the United States relative to what was available in their countries of origin, especially if they arrive as children. But Latina immigrants enroll in postsecondary education at higher rates than their male counterparts (Terriquez 2011), in part because immigrant parents tend to be protective of adolescent girls and to limit their leisure activities outside the home (López 2003; Smith 2002; Espiritu 2000).

In short, although it is important to recognize that gender relations have changed south of the U.S.-Mexico border as well as in *el Norte* (Gutmann 2004), and that the gender effects of migration are complex and at times contradictory (see

¹ Nevertheless, due largely to their higher marriage and fertility rates, Latina immigrant women have lower labor force participation rates than both U.S.-born women and Latino immigrant men, especially among the unauthorized (see Fry 2006).

Parrado and Flippen 2005), the available evidence suggests that the migration process has a positive impact on women's status. For our purposes, the key outcome is a large supply of Latina immigrants who move freely and comfortably in the public sphere, who have experienced some degree of social and economic empowerment, and who are motivated to consolidate those advances. As Pessar (1999) comments in her review of the literature, migration-based "gains in gender equity are central to women's desires to settle, more or less permanently, to protect their advances." She adds: "In contrast, many men seek to return home rapidly to regain the status and privileges that migration itself has challenged."²

These "here" versus "there" orientations give immigrant civic and political engagement a strikingly gendered character, as Jones-Correa (1998) documents in his study of New York City. Latino immigrant men tend to be attracted to political projects focused on their countries of origin, while Latina immigrant women's political activity is more often directed at improving the situation of their families and communities in the United States. This has important implications for our puzzle, most importantly that women face limited male competition for leadership roles in political projects focused on the situation of immigrants "here" in the United States. One result is that, as lack of legal status has become an increasingly critical barrier to economic advancement for more and more immigrants, women's U.S.-oriented political focus has propelled them directly into organizing and advocacy roles in the immigrant rights movement.

Like paid employment itself, immigrant women's activism often begins as an extension into the public sphere of traditional female obligations toward children and families, drawing them into community-based organizing efforts rooted in what Temma Kaplan (1982) calls "female consciousness." The community-based group "Mothers of East L.A." is one well-documented example (Pardo 1998). The massive spring 2006 immigrant rights marches provide a more spectacular, if less enduring illustration. Those protests became "a family affair," attracting vast numbers of women and children, and listing family preservation as a key demand (Bloemraad and Trost 2011; Palleres and Flores-Gonzales 2011). Even where explicit familial discourse is absent, women's civic and political engagement is typically understood as service to the immigrant community and to their own family members.

Nevertheless, few Latina immigrant activists engage in any publicly visible "feminist" political work. Hondagneu-Sotelo's observation (1994:196) regarding the Mexican immigrant women she studied a couple of decades ago that "forms of oppression which derive from their class, ethnic and legal status were experienced as more decisive than gender oppression" remains accurate. However, like Chicana activists who distanced themselves from white feminism but quietly built a

² Zentgraf (2002) also found this pattern among immigrants with working-class backgrounds, but in her sample the women who had been middle class prior to migration resembled male immigrants in that the status loss they suffered upon arrival in the United States made them nostalgic for their countries of origin.

“feminista” movement *within* the broader Chicano movement (Roth 2004), many Latina immigrant rights activists have developed a feminist consciousness in the course of their political careers. In some cases women’s involvement in left-wing movements in Central America sparked their interest in feminism (see Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001); in others the catalyst was exposure to Latina feminisms in the United States. Whatever its source, as we discuss below, feminist consciousness – although rarely displayed publicly – served as an important resource for many Latinas who moved into leadership roles in the immigrant rights movement.

The Immigrant Rights Movement: Growth and Organizational Dynamics

Unlike migration itself, the immigrant rights movement is a recent historical phenomenon. It has no precedent among the massive wave of European immigrants who arrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and who could easily become U.S. citizens. For them, legal status was seldom a concern (although Chinese and other Asian immigrants did face exclusion), prior to the severe restrictions on entry imposed in the 1920s. Only after 1965, when new legislation sparked a resurgence of immigration, while limiting the number of legal entrants from the Western hemisphere for the first time, did undocumented immigration become a significant social problem (Ngai 2004). By the 1980s, millions of people – mostly Mexican and Central American – with severely restricted civil rights were living and working in the United States without legal authorization.

Political organizing and advocacy on behalf of this vast disenfranchised group emerged only in the late 20th century, taking off shortly after the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which made it possible for large numbers of undocumented persons to gain legal status. Although its intention was to eliminate illegal immigration, IRCA’s provisions for tighter border security, along with subsequent enforcement efforts, stimulated unprecedented growth in the undocumented population, as many migrants who had previously planned to return to their country of origin opted to take up permanent residence in the United States. To avoid increasingly perilous and expensive border crossings, many who arrived without authorization now remained in *el Norte*, and family members often joined them (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). The unauthorized population grew from about 2.5 million in 1989 (just after many had gained legal status under IRCA) to an estimated 11-12 million persons twenty years later (see Passell 2006; Passell and Cohn 2010).

As their numbers grew, the undocumented increasingly became a political lightning rod. Starting in the 1990s, restrictionists won passage of harsh legislative measures limiting immigrant access to public services and imposing a series of penalties on the undocumented. In response, immigrants and their supporters increased their own mobilization efforts, gradually drawing in the four sets of organizations enumerated above. Although the movement’s roots were planted over the preceding two decades (see Hondagneu-Sotelo and Salas 2008), the

dynamic is illustrated by the massive spring 2006 street protests against H.R. 4437 – the draconian proposal passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in late 2005 that would have criminalized immigrants for simply being present in the country without authorization, as well as penalizing U.S. citizens who offered the undocumented support or assistance. Like California’s Proposition 187 in 1994 and many other radical anti-immigrant proposals, H.R. 4437 never became law, but created widespread alarm within the immigrant community and galvanized a massive political mobilization.

On the surface, the contemporary immigrant rights movement appears as a classic civil rights movement, seeking a path to legal status (and thereby citizenship rights) for the vast unauthorized foreign-born population.³ The movement also includes efforts to secure more mundane civil rights like access to drivers’ licenses (no small matter in the case of Los Angeles!) or banking services. Less obviously but equally fundamentally, the immigrant rights movement is also a labor movement, seeking economic advancement for immigrant workers and their children.

Whereas in the past, legal Latino immigrants have not been consistently supportive of their undocumented co-nationals, they are far more unified today, thanks to the growing number of mixed-status households, as well as the growing stigmatization and racialization of Latinos (regardless of legal status) by anti-immigrant political forces. The Latino working-class population remains internally stratified, but rather than being a source of political division, that very stratification motivates immigrant rights activism: the fact that many of their fellow Latinos have obtained stable working-class jobs with decent pay and conditions motivates the millions of unauthorized workers stuck in low-wage, precarious jobs at the bottom of the U.S. labor market to hope that they can do the same.

That aspiration for upward mobility, for access to the mainstream of the labor market where workers can earn a living wage and where employment conditions conform to legal requirements, is central to the immigrant rights agenda. Similarly, the undocumented student movement focuses on improving access to higher education and winning legal status for college graduates so that they can secure employment commensurate with their qualifications.

Over time, the civil rights and labor movement agendas of the immigrant rights movement have increasingly merged, since access to legal status remains the primary barrier to economic advancement for students as well as adult immigrants. A wide array of organizations has joined together in support of this dual agenda,

³The 2003 Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride explicitly linked the 1960s civil rights movement to the immigrant rights movement: <http://www.iwfr.org/default3.asp> Although African Americans were never subject to deportation, they were concentrated in the same types of jobs (in agriculture, domestic service, hospitality, and low-wage manufacturing) that unauthorized immigrants have today, and were routinely deprived of basic civil rights, including the franchise.

including labor unions, worker centers and other community-based organizations, ethnic organizations, and undocumented student groups. Thanks to the escalating attacks of anti-immigrant restrictionists, even the once-apolitical hometown associations have been galvanized into immigrant rights activity in recent decades.

The diverse entities that comprise the L.A. immigrant rights movement vary in structure and culture, as well as – especially relevant for our purposes here – in organizational age. Some of them have existed for extended periods of time, most notably the long-established labor unions that have recruited immigrants into their ranks in recent years. Many hometown associations and ethnic organizations also date back several decades. By contrast, other immigrant rights organizations, like the worker centers and student groups, are of recent vintage, founded in the 1990s or even later.

As a large sociological literature on organizations suggests, this temporal variation matters. As Stinchcombe (1965) famously argued, the historical context in which an organization initially takes shape has enduring significance; more specifically, the cultural assumptions of the era in which an organization was founded continue to influence it subsequently. Similar claims appear in more recent literature from the “new institutionalism” school (e.g. Hannan and Freeman 1984; DiMaggio and Powell 1991), which stresses the path dependency of organizational structures over time and their bureaucratic inertia.

Although this stream of literature rarely addresses gender issues directly, it nevertheless helps to illuminate the reasons for variation in women’s leadership among the various segments of the immigrant rights movement. As we discuss below, immigrant rights organizations that took shape in the late twentieth century, after gender equity had become a legitimate and widely accepted normative goal in the larger society, tend to be far more open to women’s leadership than organizations of older vintage, which retain longstanding traditions of male-dominated leadership (see Milkman 1990 for a similar analysis of four cohorts of U.S. labor unions).

The rapid growth of the immigrant rights movement amplifies the effects of organizational age. As we noted above, the movement has expanded dramatically over the past two decades, creating large numbers of leadership vacancies. All else equal, it is easier to diversify a growing movement than one of stable or declining size, in part because incumbent leaders typically seek to hold on to their positions over time. Movement growth, moreover, stimulates the formation of new organizations, in this case worker centers and student immigrant rights groups, which are not only smaller (making leadership roles in them less prestigious) but also less burdened by the deeply embedded patriarchal traditions typical of older organizations like unions, ethnic organizations and hometown associations.

Another organizational theory relevant to our inquiry is Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s (1977) classic analysis of the tendency of executive-level organizational

incumbents to recruit new leaders with characteristics similar to their own, thus perpetuating male-dominated leadership structures. As Kanter suggests, this pattern is largely driven by the need for trust among leaders in organizations that face uncertain external environments (Kanter 1977: 48). The older organizations in the immigrant rights movement, established with male leadership in the distant past, often confront such uncertainties and they often exhibit the tendency toward “homosexual reproduction” Kanter highlighted.

Finally, in the case of immigrant hometown associations, another factor affects the gender composition of leadership, tied to the gendered “here” versus “there” political orientations mentioned above that Jones-Correa (1998) highlighted. Although they have only recently been drawn into immigrant rights activity, hometown associations (as the term suggests) originated with a focus not on the United States but on immigrants’ countries of origin. This makes them disproportionately attractive to men and helps explain why their leadership is more male-dominated than that of other immigrant rights organizations (Goldring 2003), as we discuss further below.

Data and Methods

Our analysis of women’s leadership in the L.A. immigrant rights movement is based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with key leaders, as well as extensive informal observation of the movement over several years. Using purposive sampling, we conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen foreign-born Latina immigrant rights leaders in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, no systematic inventories of the movement’s organizations or leaders currently exist, so other types of sampling were not feasible. Our sample is modest in size but includes most of the prominent high-level immigrant female leaders in the local movement we could identify. We also interviewed three second-generation Latino activists who are involved in different segments of the movement, two women and one man, to gather additional perspectives on the gender dynamics of the movement. While our analysis focuses on the experiences of foreign-born Latina leaders, the interviews with these three additional respondents provided valuable insights as well.

In addition to the interviews, we convened four focus groups with 18 Latina immigrant rights leaders, all but two of whom were first-generation immigrants. There is overlap between the interviews and focus groups: 12 of the 18 focus group participants were also interviewed individually. The interviews and focus groups range from one to three hours in length; all of them were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Most of our interviewees are of Mexican origin; the rest are from Central and South America. They span a wide age range, from young student activists to seasoned union and community leaders with decades of experience. A striking demographic feature of the sample that we did not anticipate is that many of its

members migrated to the United States as children or teenagers, rather than as adults – the 1.5 generation – the implications of which we discuss below.

Although our research focused on Los Angeles, there is scattered evidence in the literature that Latina leaders are also prominent in community and political organizations in other U.S. immigrant communities. For example, Ricourt and Danta (2003) document extensive Latina representation in the leadership of community-based organizations, social service organizations, and electoral politics in Queens, New York; Chandler (2011) highlights the growth of women's leadership in the predominantly immigrant labor union that represents casino workers in Las Vegas; and the pioneering study by Hardy-Fanta (1993), although conducted prior to the development of the immigrant rights movement, found extensive involvement of Latinas in local politics in Boston in the late 1980s.

Immigration and Women's Empowerment

Most of the women leaders we interviewed were 1.5 generation immigrants, although a few immigrated as adults. The latter group directly experienced the shift toward gender egalitarianism typically associated with migration, while those who arrived as children or adolescents witnessed its effects on their mothers or other female relatives. Both groups often noted that it was rare for married women to work outside the home in their countries of origin, where marriage itself came earlier in the typical life cycle. "That's what the culture was, you got married young," a Columbian immigrant leader recalled. "So the opportunities definitely were more limited for women." Similarly, a Chilean-born leader told us, "In my family there was a recurring idea that women stay at home, and the men are allowed to work. My aunt never worked until she came to the United States."

Migration was also associated with basic material improvements in women's daily lives. "You have a washing machine here," one leader explained. "You don't have to go out to the river to wash clothes by hand. You don't have to grind everything. There is also a certain amount of liberty to do things, having your own identity, not as this submissive person to a husband. So the women love it here. I remember my mom saying, 'No, no, no! I don't want to go back there. It's too hard.' She loved the supermarket where she could just go pick up chicken."

Many interviewees observed that immigrants' economic survival in the United States required that women enter the paid workforce along with men. "Once you get here, the whole system they had back home, the stay-at-home wife, that changes. Eventually your financial needs force you to go to work. At one point all the women that migrated from my hometown worked in the factories," an indigenous Mexican immigrant leader explained. "The men might like it or not like it, but they had to let it happen, because otherwise they couldn't pay the rent."

Another leader who immigrated to the United States as a child echoed this account, and elaborated on the implications of women's workforce participation:

Things really shift here. There's this real tension between the husband and wife. Before, the men were the heads of the family, able to provide. Now all of a sudden the women have to work, because it's not enough what they bring in with just one individual [working]. As my mother said, "Either I work or we starve."

It was harder for the men to adapt, coming to the United States. It was very easy for them to get distracted, whether it was in bars or whatever. The women had to be very strong, while the men would sometimes philander. For the women in my family, it was always about: how do you create stability? The women would complain, "These husbands, they always give up so easily." They [the men] were just having a difficult time.

Indeed, for men the changes associated with migration were often painful, in part because gender norms rapidly shifted north of the border. "It was totally different where I grew up compared to here," a Salvadoran immigrant leader stated.

There, the men were in charge. For example, my grandfather: he always put my grandmother down; he told her what to do and not to do, and he didn't care what she said. Here it was different. Women still had to clean, cook and do all that. But the men and the women both *had* to work; if not, they couldn't survive, or pay the bills. So here, the women could come and go freely. Also the laws are better here. Men have to provide child support, domestic abuse laws are stronger, and there are more organizations to help victims of domestic violence. Women have more legal rights.

In general, then, our interview data confirm the findings in the literature regarding the improvements migration brings in the economic and social status of women relative to that of men in their communities, largely driven by increased female labor force participation. Yet as some interviewees pointed out, married immigrant women were often caught between the constraints of their home country's culture and the new demands of life in the United States. "My mother had to work; it was not a choice," one leader recalled. "But it was a struggle. The women still have to take care of the kids and in many instances they are dealing with the bad side of the culture, the demanding husband and all that stuff." Indeed, sometimes men responded to the situation by engaging in acts of domestic violence, which in turn often led to separation and divorce (Boehm 2008; Coll 2005).

As immigrant wives and mothers grappled with such conflicting pressures, many urged their daughters – 1.5 and second generation immigrants – to chart an independent path rather than relying on men. "My mother would talk to me about this when I was young," one leader recalled. "She'd tell me, 'Make sure you have your own money, your own bank account. You need to be able to take care of

yourself and not depend on a man.” Another interviewee remembered, “My dad was kind of conservative, he didn’t want us to learn how to drive. But my mom would steal the car keys when he was not watching and say, ‘Here, learn to drive!’ She knew that for our future we needed to do those things.”

Not only did their mothers support their aspirations, but the 1.5 generation was less constrained by patriarchal traditions to begin with. They also had far greater access to educational opportunities than their mothers. And whereas in their countries of origin men had more access to education than women, in the United States today, the pattern is reversed: young immigrant Latinas are more likely than their male counterparts to gain access to higher education (Terriquez 2011). As noted in previous literature, a sexual double standard contributes to this dynamic: immigrant parents often strictly regulate girls’ leisure activities in an effort to protect their sexuality, while the boys enjoy far more freedom (Lopez 2003; Smith 2002, see also Espiritu 2000). “The boys could do a lot more, they could stay out late,” one informant recalled. “They were never asked where they were going. But with the girls it was more restrictive.” Here, patriarchal tradition proved advantageous to young female immigrants, while the personal liberty afforded to their brothers distracted them from schoolwork and often led to negative outcomes.

Nearly all of the women leaders we interviewed who had arrived in the United States as children or teenagers attended college, and this experience deeply influenced their lives. Several women pointed out that they would not have been able to pursue post-secondary schooling had they remained in their countries of origin. “I have cousins in Mexico who are around my age, and a lot of the guys went to college,” one leader told us. “But the females are married with kids, or they’re single mothers. There’s no talk about college. There’s not talk about having a future. It’s all about having a family, taking care of your family. That’s the role of the women.” Others compared their situation to that of their mothers: “My mother got married very young, she must have been sixteen. She was very intelligent, and she really supported us going to school, even though she didn’t go to school herself.”

Higher education not only was a source of improved economic and social status for the 1.5 generation, but for many, it also was the context in which they first became politically aware and active. Several immigrant rights leaders began their activist careers as members of Latino student groups. As one recalled, “My whole focus when I was in college was Chicano. I got involved in MEChA.⁴ We took over the administration building!” For our younger informants, organizations of undocumented students played a similar role. Some leaders had become activists even earlier, typically in high school; this group deepened their political engagement as college students. Many recalled teachers who had encouraged them to continue their education and to pursue professional careers; others spoke of teachers who were political mentors.

⁴MEChA is the abbreviation for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán.

Higher education was far less accessible to those leaders in our sample who immigrated to the United States as adults, but they too found a path to political engagement, typically through labor unions or community-based organizations. A few had significant political experience in their home countries, and were drawn into U.S. immigrant rights activism soon after they immigrated.

Through these varied paths, our informants not only developed a political consciousness but also acquired leadership skills. The migration process itself had disrupted the traditional gender hierarchies of the sending countries, creating a large supply of Latina immigrants who moved easily in the public sphere. Most of them had experienced significant improvement – through employment, education, or both – in economic and social status relative to their counterparts back home. When opportunities arose to step into leadership roles in the U.S. immigrant rights movement, these newly empowered women were ready. Those opportunities first appeared in the late 1980s, and expanded further in the 1990s and in the 2000s. However, they were unevenly distributed across the various types of organizations that comprised the new movement.

New Opportunities for Leadership

Leadership opportunities in the immigrant rights movement proliferated after the passage of IRCA in 1986. However, some of the organizations that became part of the new movement were more receptive to women's leadership than others. Our interview data cannot be considered definitive on this point, but they confirm the claims in the organizational sociology literature discussed earlier: women confront disproportionately steep barriers to entry into leadership roles in older entities like labor unions, hometown associations (HTAs) and established ethnic organizations, reflecting patriarchal traditions embedded in their organizational structures. In the case of HTAs, the negative effects of organizational age are compounded by a focus on homeland-oriented political projects that disproportionately appeal to men nostalgic for pre-migration gender arrangements. Here our data confirm previous findings (especially Goldring 2003) about the male-dominated character of HTAs.

Our data also align with the expectation that newer organizations – student groups engaged in immigrant rights advocacy, worker centers and other recently established community-based organizations, and umbrella groups that build coalitions across the movement – would be relatively receptive to women's leadership. All these organizations were formed in the late twentieth century, when progressive political groups generally shared a normative commitment to gender equality. Our interviewees sometimes did encounter resistance to women's leadership in these newer organizations, but patriarchal norms were less entrenched and easier to neutralize than in unions, HTAs and ethnic organizations.

Our interviews span across all four segments of the L.A. immigrant rights movement. We briefly discuss the nature and extent of women's leadership in each of them below, moving chronologically from the oldest to the newest types of organizations.

Labor unions. Starting in the 1980s, several long-established labor unions in southern California began to actively recruit Latino immigrants (both male and female) into their ranks. The best-known examples are the "Justice for Janitors" campaign sponsored by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the organizing drives of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (now called UNITE HERE). Other unions in the L.A. region also organized immigrant workers, although more sporadically. As their immigrant memberships grew, these unions became strong advocates of immigrant rights in Los Angeles, and later on the national level. SEIU and UNITE HERE have engaged in a wide variety of activities on behalf of their foreign-born members, and are also important players in the wider movement, opposing anti-immigrant initiatives like Prop. 187 and H.R. 4437, advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, and so on.

Many immigrant women have been active members and mid-level leaders in these unions, but only a few have been able to move into upper-level positions. The tradition of male leadership is deeply embedded in these organizations, reflecting the gender norms of the era in which they originated. The SEIU was founded in 1921 and the unions that now comprise UNITE HERE date back even earlier, to the late 19th century. Although in some respects they have transcended the legacy of the past, barriers to women's entry into executive-level leadership remain.

Many immigrant women have become union activists in Los Angeles in recent years and quite a few have distinguished themselves as rank-and-file leaders. "We have many women leaders in this union. Many are single mothers who work at night, take care of their children, and still participate in the union," a mid-level janitors' union leader told us. "I've seen many instances where women lead work stoppages, where they are the ones leading the fight against the supervisors." Indeed, union activism is a vital source of civic engagement and empowerment for immigrant women, many of whom have no previous history of political activism. As a female L.A. janitors' union activist told another researcher (Cranford 2007: 432):

The union draws the women out of the closet. In our countries, politics is almost always left to the men. Few women participate. So you ignore those things; politics doesn't interest you. To organize? Forget it. But here [in Los Angeles], suddenly, I have done a million things.

In the L.A. janitors' union, immigrant women often outnumbered men among rank-and-file union activists – and many women became shop stewards, union staff, and negotiating committee members. By 1999, women made up nearly half of the union's executive board and over 40 percent of shop stewards and members of the contract negotiating committee (Cranford 2007). But moving into upper-level

leadership has proven more difficult. Despite the extensive participation of women at other levels, the SEIU's L.A. janitors' union has never had a female president.⁵

Immigrant women involved in other L.A. unions complained to us that even at the lower levels, palpable resistance to women's leadership endures. As one leader recounted, "Women were so drawn to the issues, they did the work, packed up the kids and took them along, or figured out how to get extra babysitters. But when it came to the formal union positions, it was all men. In every situation it was all men. We were not allowed into the inner circle and that was really disrespectful." Another woman declared, "I have a love-hate relationship with my union. It's very, very hierarchical. And there's a lot of folks with the old traditional mentality that think women should not be in the union, especially women of color."

Another union leader we interviewed – an exceptional case of a woman who *did* occupy a high-profile position in the L.A. labor movement – commented on the contrast between the labor movement and other segments of the immigrant rights movement. Her insight echoes scholarly claims about the effects of organizational age in the sociological literature (although she was not familiar with that literature):

The immigrant rights movement actually has *far* more women leaders than labor does. I think it's because there wasn't already a structure of leadership in place. Immigrant rights organizations were created; they were brand new. Since women were grassroots leaders in the immigrant rights movement, it was a natural thing for them to become the formal leaders of the organizations that emerged. But the labor movement already has a set structure. If you're in there, you're in there for life. You rarely get out. It's a much harder thing to get into as a woman.

However formidable, these obstacles are not impossible to overcome. In Los Angeles' main UNITE HERE affiliate, a woman did ascend to the top of the leadership hierarchy in 1989, when a (U.S.-born) Latina, María Elena Durazo, became the president of the largest hotel union local. She obtained this position only after a fierce battle contesting the white male incumbent leadership (see Milkman and Wong 2000). In 2006, Durazo, who has been a prominent advocate for immigrant rights throughout her career, went on to become the head of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, the single most visible labor leadership position in the region.

Established hometown associations and ethnic organizations.

Immigrant hometown associations (HTAs) and Latino ethnic organizations have existed for many decades in Los Angeles, long the single most popular U.S. destination for Latin American immigrants. HTAs grew with the surge in immigration after 1965, although some had been founded well before that period. Today they number in the hundreds. Most HTAs began as largely apolitical, socially-oriented transnational organizations, but they have become increasingly involved in

⁵ However, a woman, Mary Kay Henry, became the top national leader of SEIU in 2010.

politics on both sides of the U.S. –Mexico border in recent years. Mexican and Central American governments have engaged HTAs in efforts to promote economic development in immigrants' home countries (Iskander 2010), and in response to the escalating attacks on Latino immigrants inside the United States, HTAs have joined the wider immigrant rights movement. Ethnic organizations, especially among Mexican-Americans, also have a long history in the L.A. area; they too have been drawn into immigrant rights advocacy in recent years.

Although their history does not reach back as far as that of labor unions, established HTAs and ethnic organizations originated prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism; as in unions, barriers to entry to upper-level leadership positions in these organizations are salient for women. One of our interviewees, who served on the executive board of a major Latino ethnic organization and eventually became its top leader, secured the position only after she filed a lawsuit against a group of male board members who tried block her ascent. She recalled:

The guys, certain members of the board, tried to fire me. They wanted to put in a man. I was a skinny little troublemaking hippie lawyer. I didn't look like a leader to them. I sued them for violating the by-laws. They didn't even follow the rules! They wanted to put in [a former elected official] as the head. They said, "He has leadership qualities." I took them to court and I won.

The HTAs are even more male-dominated than such ethnic organizations, largely because they focus not on immigrants' lives in the United States but rather on improving conditions in their countries of origin – compounding the effects of organizational age. Their external focus makes these groups disproportionately appealing to male immigrants, as we have already noted. As Goldring (2003: 341) puts it, HTA activities "provide an important vehicle for gaining male status and deploying political power." Even commentators who are not particularly attentive to gender issues have observed that the leadership of HTAs is almost entirely male (e.g. Waldinger, Popkin and Magana 2008: 854; Guarnizo, Portes and Haller 2003).

Many of our interviewees commented on the patriarchal culture of the HTAs. "The *machista* tradition is deeply ingrained," one woman HTA leader stated. "The first time I went [to a meeting] a woman raised her hand. Her husband was sitting next to her, and he said to her, '*tu no hablas* [you don't speak].' I thought, 'I'm glad I don't have a husband!'" Another interviewee told us: "Those men [in the HTAs] think that women don't have good ideas. If a woman proposes something for the group, it never gets done. If the man proposes the same thing, they celebrate it. They are totally *machistas*." A third exclaimed, "Those organizations are very hierarchal and patriarchal. It would take a revolution to change it!"

Most HTA leaders are male immigrants who specialize in gathering resources from their compatriots in the United States to benefit their hometown communities. In so doing they often can recoup the gender status they lost in the course of migration to the United States. They regularly travel back and forth, and they

cherish the respect they command on both sides of the border. “When we have the fiestas to collect funds [in Los Angeles], I am the leader and am treated with respect,” a male Salvadoran HTA leader told a researcher. “When I go back home to inspect the works paid for with our contributions, I am as important as the Mayor.” (Portes 1999: 466).

Women often find such cross-border travel difficult, especially if they are mothers. Even so, however, exceptions exist to the overall pattern of male domination of HTAs. One woman we interviewed was the president of an HTA with an indigenous membership. “In many of the other Mexican HTAs, the women mainly take care of the beauty pageants and the food,” she told us. “In my community we participate more equally. We are one of the only hometown associations with a woman president.”⁶

Community-based organizations. As we have noted, although male immigrants may feel nostalgic for the patriarchal culture they left behind, the opposite is usually true for women. As Goldring (2003: 247) observes, “Over time, and especially if their families are in the United States, women may lose interest in maintaining transnational spaces.” In contrast to politically active immigrant men who tend to be keenly interested in homeland-oriented affairs, female activists tend to focus their energies on U.S.-based issues and institutions. (Jones-Correa 1998)

As a result, immigrant women are disproportionately involved in worker centers and other immigrant-oriented community-based organizations (CBOs). “Women are more organized. We are the ones who are out in front, leading these organizations,” one prominent leader told us. Women are more willing to take the risk and step up.”

These newer organizations tend to be far more receptive to women’s leadership than unions, established ethnic organizations and HTAs. Our interviewees illustrate the rapid movement of women into high-profile positions in immigrant rights-oriented CBOs. To some extent this occurs by default, in that men demonstrate less interest in this kind of work, which is oriented toward immigrants’ lives “here” rather than in their home countries. Moreover, as relatively small and poorly funded organizations, CBOs and worker centers may also offer less attractive leadership positions than older, more established organizations do.

Most of these organizations were established in the late twentieth century, after the women’s movement had pushed a wide variety of progressive organizations to embrace the goal of gender equality and at least nominally incorporate it into their internal cultures and structures. Some worker centers focus exclusively or primarily on organizing immigrant women in female-dominated

⁶ Such variations in the gender politics of HTAs in part reflect the “regional patriarchies” that López-González (2003) has analyzed, the nature and extent of which differ significantly from one region to another within Mexico and other Latin American countries.

sectors of the economy (such as domestic work), and some use “explicit language about gender and gender oppression in their work,” as Janice Fine (2007: 216) has pointed out. But women also lead many worker centers with male-dominated and gender-mixed constituencies. One of our interviewees, who had developed a popular education program focused on “gender relations” for her worker center told us, “We are getting more and more women participating, we have really strong women leaders who make themselves heard. Organizers have become more conscious, they talk constantly with the workers about respect and equal participation of men and women.”

The extent of women’s representation in the leadership of community-based immigrant rights organizations is impressive, although the path to the top has not always been easy. Many did encounter resistance as they moved up the leadership ranks, especially early in their careers. But this segment of the L.A. immigrant rights movement today has many more female leaders than do unions, HTAs or ethnic organizations. In the broader immigrant rights movement, only student organizations contain a greater proportion of female leaders.

Student immigrant rights groups. A recent portrait of the L.A. student immigrant rights movement in *The New York Times Magazine* noted that the movement has been “largely powered by women” and that “women have also stuck with the movement long after many men have dropped out or burned out.” (Jones 2010) Our interviews confirm this account. “It’s a woman-run show,” one female immigrant student leader told us. “We’re always scrambling to find men. The women are doing the work and organizing.” Another noted, “The women are usually elected leaders, in part because few men run against them.” Still another stated, “We definitely have a very strong presence of women leaders taking a stance on undocumented student issues. Last year we only had one male on our board.”

Not only are many of these student groups unencumbered by the patriarchal traditions that characterize older organizations, but their predominantly female leadership also reflects the sharp gender disparity in college attendance among immigrant Latino youth (Terriquez 2011). “The reality is that most of the students in college are women,” one female student leader noted, “because men are going to war or they’re going to jail.” In addition, many immigrant women student activists today are self-consciously building on the legacy of Chicana or other Latin American feminisms, which they learned about in ethnic studies classes and in campus political organizations.

Although women seem to have remarkably ready access to leadership roles in the immigrant student movement, they do confront sexism at times – mostly from outsiders. For example, one activist complained, “The media always wants us to put a man in front of the camera, not a woman, to speak on our behalf.” Finally, some young women leaders, like their older counterparts, must cope with disapproval from family members or romantic partners. As one interviewee put it, “A lot of the

gender issues that happen are behind closed doors, when people are dealing with their families or with dating.”

Feminist Consciousness

Although women are actively engaged in the immigrant rights movement and are prominent among its leaders, they seldom and selectively incorporate gender-based or feminist claims into their public discourse. The movement’s central aim is to establish a path to legalization for the undocumented and help them gain access to basic civil rights and economic opportunities from which they are now excluded. Some campaigns focus on class-based inequities, like those highlighting employer abuses of immigrant workers. Others highlight racial and ethnic injustice, challenging the racialized discourse of anti-immigrant political forces, which stigmatizes Latinos generally, regardless of their legal status. Calls for gender equality do not figure centrally in the movement’s claims-making repertoire, yet women leaders do make strategic (although not always publicly explicit) efforts to promote women’s rights.

When we asked the leaders we interviewed if they considered themselves to be feminists, a large majority responded affirmatively – and several exclaimed, “*cien por ciento* [100 percent]!” One immigrant rights coalition leader declared, “I’m a feminist and a proud one.” A union leader answered, “Yes! That’s the only way to survive in this *machista* world.” A student leader was also unequivocal: “I want equal opportunity for both men and women, based on merit, not gender.... I’m very much against patriarchy.” And an immigrant rights coalition leader stated, “Growing up, I saw the double standard culturally of how women were treated, and I really rebelled against that. I don’t want any part of that side of our culture.”

Even those who rejected the label “feminist” endorsed the idea of gender equality. “I have a lot of feminist values,” one of them told us, “and I got a lot of my self-confidence from thinking like a feminist.” Some insisted on a qualified definition of the term. “I’d say I’m a feminist with a vision of making sure that everyone is incorporated,” one leader declared. Another stated, “I see the world from a women’s perspective, understanding how policies and the system impact women and then doing something about it.”

Many of the leaders in our sample who had come of age in the 1960s and 1970s had been active in the Chicana feminist movement. One interviewee cut her political teeth on a campaign against forced sterilization of Latina women in an East L.A. hospital, and went on to persuade the Mexican-American organization she worked in as a young activist to support the struggle for abortion rights. A third had been part of a women’s caucus in the Central American solidarity movement. This generation of women tended to be critical of mainstream “Anglo” feminism, however. As a union leader explained:

I hesitate to call myself a feminist because in my mind it still equates with a white upper-class women's movement... I do consider myself a feminist in the context of the labor movement and for women of color. And I think that the feminist movement is starting to acknowledge working women's issues as a real priority, so hopefully the women coming after me won't have the feeling that "feminist" means white and upper class.

Another leader from this generation told us:

I see myself as a feminist, but feminism is defined differently for Latina women. The mainstream women's movement didn't always relate to the reality of most women. Like in the 1980s when the women with the blue suits and the bow ties tried to be men. That's not going to do it, because you're not accepting who you are. I feel comfortable being a woman. I love this skin I am in. I love being a woman. I love being a Latina. I wouldn't want to be anything else. Gender has been central to everything I do and how I see the world, but I don't have to talk about it. I just do it.

Nearly all the leaders we interviewed had a strong feminist consciousness. Although most did not express it publicly in their immigrant rights work, which was framed in the language of civil rights, labor rights, or human rights, they were acutely aware of the reality of male domination in the wider society, as well as in their own organizations. One leader explained, "There is a basic lack of respect for women and their work. It's so normal for us to be pushed aside that we often just accept it. You want the work to get done and so you just let it happen. The men take advantage of that." And an immigrant rights leader described her experience when she first became the director of a major L.A. community-based organization:

Soon after I became the executive director, I remember once I went to a meeting and one of the men there, says to me, "*You* are the executive director? And I thought you were just a pretty thing!" And later when we were sitting there in the meeting, the guy reaches under the table and touches my leg. I was so angry! We ended up asking that he be removed from his job. It was a very male-centric movement for a long time. The presence and leadership of women was very shocking to the old-timers.

A union leader agreed: "Women were disrespected in the sense of not being allowed into the inner circle... We pushed but we never wanted it to go to the point where there would be a division in the ranks."

Like feminists in the civil rights and Chicano movements of earlier years (Robnett 1996; Roth 2004), those in today's immigrant rights movement choose their battles. As one leader told us, "Sometimes we don't want to rock the boat, because the issues we're dealing with are so critical. It's a matter of life and death for people, whether someone gets deported or maybe gets killed, so we passively accept the reality." Another suggested, "Sometimes you don't want to raise the

gender issue as a problem because you want to seem strong, as tough as the guys. You just want to focus on the policy issues. So it may not get talked about.”

Feminism served these women leaders well when they encountered obstacles blocking their access to positions of leadership. On those occasions, they often challenged men directly – although typically behind closed doors. One immigrant rights leader told us about efforts to advance women’s leadership through collectively pressuring the men inside her organization:

We wanted the men to understand that they have to share power, that they have to support and be in solidarity with women. It may mean that they will not run for office the next time, that instead they are going to support a woman. For men to get to that level of consciousness, women have to wage a struggle. Someone who has that power isn’t going to give it up easily.

In other cases, women fought back individually. As one prominent leader recalled, “A couple of times the guys would lock horns with me, but they didn’t do that too often because I didn’t take it kindly. Whenever I’ve been confronted I push back, I definitely push back. You don’t mess with me.” Another woman recounted the way she dealt with a board member of her HTA who insulted her repeatedly.

I have a good relationship with the board members, with just one exception. There is a gentleman who feels that he lives back in the old country. He cannot stand it when I raise my hand. He makes a face. One day I decided to say, “Enough!” I got a big board and I wrote “*Pido la palabra por favor* [Please give me the floor].” The *machista* tradition is very deeply engraved, but we are the trailblazers, so we have to keep them in check.

These women leaders were thoughtful and strategic in confronting such problems. As one explained, “When you go there challenging the man’s need to control it’s a battle, and you need to know how to wage it – knowing that it may end up breaking your organization.” Similarly, a young activist told us, “The recognition that you get as a leader is really different if you’re a woman, compared to a man. But it’s hard to decide, how much should I confront this? How much do you swallow it for the sake of the organization? And at the same time, how much energy do I spend addressing it so future women leaders don’t have to.”

The feminist consciousness that these leaders shared, although rarely expressed publicly, contributes to the extensive representation of women among immigrant rights leaders. It enables individual women to overcome the obstacles they encounter along the path to high-level leadership roles. At a broader level, it helps to advance gender equity in individual organizations and in the immigrant rights movement as a whole.

Conclusion

The immigrant rights movement is still a relatively young social movement, and the possibility that as it matures men will take over its top-level leadership roles cannot be entirely ruled out. But the fact that women currently enjoy the advantages of incumbency at the peak of many prominent immigrant rights organizations in Los Angeles, the city where the movement is most extensive and visible, may help prevent that outcome. In any case, the extensive representation of women in peak-level leadership roles in the immigrant rights movement is an anomaly, since nearly all other U.S. social movements, with the exception of the feminist movement and movements focused on family issues, have male-dominated leaderships. This exceptional situation, we have argued, results from three interrelated factors:

First, the migration process has given rise to a large supply of foreign-born Latinas who move easily in the public sphere, who have already experienced gains in gender equity, and who are eager to build on those gains. Access to employment is a primary driver of this dynamic; and for the 1.5 generation of immigrant Latinas who are particularly prominent among the movement's leaders, access to higher education is even more critical. The homeward-looking political orientation of many male immigrant activists also matters here, since it reduces the competition women face for leadership roles in U.S.-oriented immigrant rights organizations.

Secondly, the rapid growth of the immigrant rights movement since the late 1980s has generated growing demand for leaders. Opportunities for leadership are most extensive in newly established organizations, but also present in many older ones that have expanded as they have been drawn into immigrant rights activism. As the literature predicts, the extent of female leadership varies among the different types of organizations that comprise the movement, with the greatest inroads taking place in younger, less prestigious organizations relatively unburdened by the weight of patriarchal organizational traditions, such as student groups and worker centers. But in some cases women have secured leadership roles even in the older types of organizations, including labor unions, established HTAs and ethnic organizations.

Finally, the feminist consciousness that nearly all the Latina immigrant rights leaders we interviewed share is a third factor contributing to their life trajectories. That consciousness served as a key resource that enabled these women to confront and overcome the obstacles that most encountered at some point as they rose into positions of leadership. Their feminism may enable them to further consolidate their gains in future years, as the immigrant rights movement continues to grow and mature.

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