The Oppression of Latina Mothers: Experiences of Exploitation, Violence, Marginalization, Cultural Imperialism, and Powerlessness in Their Everyday Lives

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Abstract
Despite Latinos being the largest growing population in the United States, research has not examined the impact of social structures on the well-being of Latina immigrants; negative social discourse and restrictive laws exacerbate inequality and discrimination in this population. Through combined inductive/deductive analysis of in-depth semistructured interviews, we examined immigrant Mexican mothers’ (N = 32) descriptions of oppression in the United States. All five forms of oppression, described in Young’s oppression framework are evident: exploitation, violence, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness. Discrimination places a high burden on Latinas due to the intersection of forms of oppression and nondominant identities.

Keywords
Latinas, immigrants, mothers, oppression, discrimination, qualitative analysis

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Latinos are one of the fastest growing and the largest nondominant group in the United States (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). This population is one of the most heterogeneous groups living in the United States, with vast differences between subgroups based on historical experiences of colonization, displacement, and immigration (Aguirre & Turner, 2004). Women are migrating at rates higher than men, leading to a feminization of immigration (Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2009; Salcido & Menjivar, 2012). Often, women who migrate to the United States are escaping violence and arrive to find violence, discrimination, and oppression in their daily lives (Arguelles & Rivero, 1993; Gonzalez-Lopez, 2007).

The state of Arizona, the site of this study, has passed several restrictive immigration policies, which place the well-being of immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented, at risk. Latino immigrants in the state of Arizona report heightened levels of discrimination, stress, and insecurity as a consequence of the passage and implementation of restrictive immigration policies (Ayón & Becerra, 2013). As is customary in Latino culture, Latinas tend to be the primary caregivers for their children (Valencia-Garcia, Starks, Strick, & Simoni, 2008); thus, the impact of such policies on Latinas will trickle down to their children. Furthermore, many families are likely to be affected as four in 10 Latino children in the United States have at least one foreign-born parent (Fry & Passel, 2009). The purpose of the study was to examine the ways in which Latina mothers face oppression in the United States using Young’s (1990) forms of oppression framework. The framework outlines five forms of oppression: exploitation, violence, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness. Throughout our literature review, we attend to the ways in which the political context and the intersection of nondominant identities affect Latinas’ experiences of violence and discrimination.

**Intersecting Forms of Oppression**

Oppression represents practices that those in power use to dominate subordinate groups in society (Mullaly, 2002). For instance, such practices block a person’s opportunities for self-development and their rights, limit their full participation in society, and may result in individuals being treated as second-class citizens (Mullaly, 2002). Iris Young (1990) described oppression as the use of power to dehumanize others by denying language, education, or opportunities to develop in mind and/or spirit. Oppression does not have to be intentional and is often the result of the everyday practices or well-intentioned social policy (Young, 2004); for example, the lack of opportunities to earn an education, jobs that fail to pay a living wage, or unavailability of universal medical care are all forms of oppression. Regardless of a woman’s immigration status, when her language and phenotype identify her as Latina, members of the dominant social group may feel entitled to oppress her (Menjivar, 2011; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). The forms of oppression framework developed by Young (1990) account for the intersection of nondominant statuses on people’s experiences of oppression, and outline five “faces” of oppression: exploitation, violence, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness.
Exploitation is the accumulation of status, power, and assets by the dominant group based on the labor and energy of nondominant groups (Mullaly, 2002). Using an individual’s work to generate revenue while not compensating them justly, dangerous work, or work that places an individual’s well-being at risk are all considered exploitative in this framework. Violence is the use of physical violence, harassment, ridicule, and intimidation; within a gendered framework, this includes sexual violence, sexual coercion, and sexual harassment. Violence stigmatizes group members and instills fear; the fear of future violence may be as oppressive as the violence itself (Mullaly, 2002). Horizontal violence occurs when acts of violence are perpetrated by members of the same ethnic group. Marginalization is the exclusion of certain groups of people from meaningful and useful societal engagement. Although marginalization may not directly lead to material or economic deprivation, this is a common outcome. When individuals cannot exercise their capacities in socially defined and recognized ways, whether or not they have the material means to live a comfortable life, they are marginalized (Mullaly, 2002). Many Latino immigrants live in ethnic enclaves, which may lead to social isolation and segregation and prevent them from upward social mobility (Cohen & Merino Chavez, 2013). Cultural imperialism is a form of ethnocentrism wherein the dominant group asserts its own experience and culture as representative of the normative culture and experience (Mullaly, 2002). For many immigrants, this may lead to feelings of not belonging in the United States. Powerlessness, most essentially, is a lack of influence and respect. This lack of power affects a person’s ability to make decisions and develop his or her capabilities, often leading to disrespectful treatment (Mullaly, 2002). For example, Latina immigrants may feel powerless in their ability to change social structures that prevent them from upward mobility in their workplace, or may not be able to report harassment or abuse due to their undocumented status.

Our social structure privileges some social statuses above others; intersecting non-privileged social identities amplify one another, increasing opportunities for discrimination, exploitation, violence, and oppression (Kiehne, in press). Unequal power relations need to be explored using a sociohistorical lens to assess the impact of the intersection between gender and various forms of structural oppression (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). Latinas have myriad intersecting identities that exacerbate inequality including gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, cultural beliefs, nativity, generational status, language, citizenship status, and socioeconomic status (Crenshaw, 1993; Marrs Fuchsel, 2013; Menjivar, 2011). Violence against women is condoned through patriarchal systems of power within the social structure; violence against Latinas has the added impetus of racial/ethnic discrimination and cultural imperialism.

Political Context

The state of Arizona has passed a number of restrictive immigration policies that can be detrimental for Latino families, particularly those of mixed documentation status. Frequently, families do not seek services for themselves or their U.S.-born children.
because they are afraid of family separation and deportation (Ayón, 2014; Fortuny & Chaudry, 2011; Guendelman, Angulo, Wier, & Oman, 2005). One of the main deterrents to requesting services is Proposition 200, which requires proof of immigration status when applying for public benefits. In addition, social service providers are required to report suspected undocumented individuals to immigration officials, and social service providers who fail to report may be charged with a misdemeanor (Furman, Langer, Sanchez, & Negi, 2007). Latino immigrants’ opportunities for employment were severely limited by the Legal Arizona Worker Act (LAWA), which requires employers to verify the employment eligibility of potential employees. Although this act was meant to sanction employers, an unintended consequence is that undocumented immigrants report working longer hours without compensation (Ayón, Gurrola, Moya-Salas, Androff, & Krysik, 2012). Immigrants were further criminalized by Senate Bill 1070, which requires individuals to carry proof of documentation at all times and law enforcement officers have the right to verify individuals’ legal status. The Supreme Court struck down several of the major provisions in Senate Bill 1070; however, it upheld the provision allowing law enforcement officers to question an individual’s immigration status. Additional legislation has eliminated bilingual education (Proposition 203), limited opportunities for higher education (Proposition 300), and banned Mexican American studies (House Bill 2281). The cumulative effect of these policies has been to fuel an anti-immigrant sentiment resulting in individual and institutional discrimination in the day-to-day lives of Latinos (Ayón & Becerra, 2013).

Latinas, Immigrant Status, and Oppression

The impact of discrimination on Latinas is higher due to the intersection of nondominant identities and low-income status; yet, few studies have focused on the influence of social structures on the well-being of Latina immigrants. In the labor market, Latinas, both native and foreign born, experience wage disparities compared with their male counterparts (Hall, Greenman, & Farkas, 2010). On average, Latinas earn just 56 cents for every dollar paid to White, non-Hispanic men (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2015). In addition, the wage premium associated with education is not found for Latinas; that is, the wage return for schooling is lowest among Latinas (Hall et al., 2010). Concomitantly, wages for foreign- and native-born Latinas grow at a significantly slower pace than those for Whites (Hall et al., 2010).

In addition to wage disparities, Latina immigrants encounter excessive work requirements, racial tensions, and sexual harassment and assault in the workplace (Eggerth, DeLaney, Flynn, & Jacobson, 2012; Waugh, 2010). Latinas have reported a wide range of occupational risks as they are exposed to fumes, dust, loud noises, extreme temperatures, and long working hours (Eggerth et al., 2012). They often lack the necessary safety and personal protective equipment (such as gloves, masks, or safety glasses) resulting in skin irritation, chemical burns, slips, and falls (Eggerth et al., 2012). In addition to exposure to chemicals or noise and physical strain (shoulders, neck, back, and hands), Latinas report workplace abuse, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment (Krieger et al., 2006). Among farm-working Latina immigrants,
sexual harassment, coercion, and assault are commonplace (Waugh, 2010). Latinas reported receiving work assignments from foremen in isolated areas, sexist comments, gestures that were insulting and degrading, staring, leering, unwanted sexual attention ranging from inappropriate and offensive physical or verbal advances to attempted rape, sexual coercion, and on-the-job blackmail for sex (Waugh, 2010). Furthermore, Latinas reported that failure to deliver sexual favors risked punishment in the form of demotion, dismissal, or denial of basic necessities for performing their job (Waugh, 2010). Previous research highlights the structural discriminatory factors that maintain Latinas in poverty and render them powerless.

Latinas are at increased risk of victimization outside the workplace as well. A study on victimization (physical assault, sexual assault, stalking, and threatened violence) among native and foreign-born Latinas revealed that immigrant women reported less victimization compared with their native-born counterparts (Sabina, Cuevas, & Schally, 2013). Furthermore, of the foreign-born women, those with permanent residence status reported more victimization compared with those with nonpermanent legal status. Latino cultural identity, strongest among immigrant women, was protective with regard to sexual victimization (Sabina et al., 2013). Latina immigrants also face unique risks based on their gender and immigrant status, such as human rights abuses in immigration detention and rape by border patrol agents (Androff & Tavassoli, 2012; Arguelles & Rivero, 1993; Falcon, 2007).

Scholars have long stressed the central role of discrimination in the production of health inequities (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012; Williams & Collins, 1995). For instance, a strong positive relationship was found between discrimination and risk of alcohol abuse for women (Otiniano Verissimo, Gee, Ford, & Iguchi, 2014; Otiniano Verissimo, Grella, Amaro, & Gee, 2014). Evidence suggests that women who have experienced multiple episodes of violence (regardless of type of violence) are more likely to experience mental health problems ( Cuevas, Sabina, & Bell, 2012). Latina farmworkers reported that their health suffered due to on-the-job abuse; they experienced headaches, trouble sleeping, heart palpitations, fatigue, and nervousness (Waugh, 2010).

Despite women’s experiences of oppression, discrimination, and abuse, and the attendant health and mental health consequences, Latinas may avoid seeking formal assistance due to negative experiences with systems of care. Moreover, the salient barriers of being uninsured, undocumented, and low income, and the experiences of language and cultural barriers affect Latina’s help-seeking behaviors (Valencia-Garcia, Simoni, Alegría, & Takeuchi, 2012). Indeed, undocumented Latina immigrants who experienced victimization were less likely to seek formal help than those with permanent status (Zadnik, Sabina, & Cueva, 2014). Latina immigrants report poor experiences with health care providers, such as providers not answering questions and experiences with discrimination that prevent them from seeking help (Sanchez-Birkhead, Kennedy, Callister, & Miyamoto, 2011). Similarly, less acculturated Latinos report lower quality health care (Becerra, Androff, Messing, Castillo, & Cimino, 2015). Fear of deportation reduces the likelihood that Latinas will report crime victimization (Ammar, Orloff, Dutton, & Aguilar-Hass, 2005; Arguelles & Rivero, 1993; Menjivar & Bejarano, 2004; Reina, Lohman, & Maldonado, 2014; Vidales, 2010);
even more than fear of deportation, women’s perceptions of the police and of the procedural fairness of the system affect their willingness to report violent crime (Messing, Becerra, Ward-Lasher, & Androff, 2015). Because many Latina immigrants are marginalized from formal services, they tend to rely on informal sources of support, such as relatives, when faced with such challenges (Cortina, 2004; Waugh, 2010).

Despite the precipitous increase of the Latino population in the United States, and the known discrimination women face due to their intersecting nondominant identities, there is a dearth of empirical literature examining the multiple forms of oppression experienced by Latina mothers. We need to understand the impact that restrictive immigration policies have on the health and well-being of mothers and their children. This qualitative study uses a feminist and intersectional framework to understand how the various forms of oppression affect Latinas in all aspects of their lives. Analyzing women’s personal narratives of oppression and marginalization allows us to examine the tremendous negative impact these women encountered. It is through their lived experiences that we see the embodiment of discriminatory and oppressive policies in the United States. In addition, findings from this study can be used to inform future immigration policy efforts as well as provide practical information to assist immigrant families.

Method

Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling using brief presentations from parenting and literacy programs at three community-based agencies in Phoenix, Arizona. In the presentation, potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, potential risks and benefits, and eligibility criteria. This study is part of a larger mixed methods study that examined the impact of discrimination on parenting practices and parent–child interactions following an experience with discrimination. Individuals who were immigrants from a Latin American country and were parents of children between the ages of 7 and 12 were eligible to participate in the study. To protect participants and ensure their comfort during the interview, we did not use documentation status as part of the eligibility criteria. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author’s home institution at the time of the study.

The sample for this study consisted of 32 Mexican immigrant mothers. The participants were from northern \( (n = 16) \) and central \( (n = 16) \) Mexico. A majority of the women were married or in a committed relationship \( (n = 26, 81.3\%) \) and participants had an average three children \( (SD = 1.5) \). Eleven participants reported that some of their children had been born in Mexico and others in the United States, whereas 21 participants reported that all of their children had been born in the United States. The average age for participants was 33.6 years \( (SD = 5.47) \). The women reported migrating to the United States between the ages of 9 and 35 \( (M = 19.81, SD = 5.6) \). On average, they had resided in the United States for 13.4 years \( (SD = 3.63) \); upon further inspection, women had resided in the United States for 5-10 years \( (n = 10) \), 11-15
years (n = 13), 16-20 years (n = 8), and one participant for more than 20 years. Sixty-five percent (n = 21) of the participants had less than a high school education; of these, 10 were pursuing a General Education Diploma (GED) at the time of the study. Eight women were employed on a part-time or full-time basis and more than half of the participants had family annual incomes below US$19,999 (n = 21 or 65.6%). Sixty-five percent of participants reported having relatives living nearby (median = 2).

**Interview Guide and Procedures**

In-depth semistructured interviews were used to examine Latina mothers’ reports of oppression. The in-depth nature of the interviews allowed us to assess the scope and types of oppression experienced by Latina immigrants and facilitated a contextual portrait of participants’ lived experiences. Participants were asked to share their experiences of discrimination or injustice. Women were asked to describe the first, most impactful, and most recent time they experienced discrimination or injustice due to who they are (e.g., Latina, undocumented). Experiences of oppression also emerged as participants described immigration policies that affected their families. Follow-up questions inquired about participants’ perceptions of why they were discriminated against or treated unjustly, how they responded to the incident(s), and how they felt about the incident(s). They were asked to share concrete examples, and probing questions were used as needed. Interviews were completed in participants’ homes, a community-based agency, or a mutually agreed upon location. Interviews were conducted in Spanish by the lead author and ranged in duration from 45-120 min. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions and translations were completed by research assistants who are bilingual and bicultural. All transcripts and translations were reviewed by at least two team members and the lead author reviewed all translated quotes.

**Analysis**

A combined deductive/inductive approach was used to code the interview data. First, informed by the forms of oppression framework, we deductively coded narratives as exploitation, violence, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, or a combination of the forms of oppression (Mullaly, 2002; Young, 1990). Then, constructivist grounded theory was used to identify themes within the narratives of oppression that assisted in further delineating the aspects of each form of oppression. A constant comparative approach was used within and between interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). A constant comparative approach is used to establish analytical distinctions by comparing similarities and differences between and within transcripts. The transcripts were (re) read, labeled, and categorized using initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial line-by-line coding sticks closely to the data; that is, rather than applying a preexisting category to the data, the data are coded based on the actions that are present in the narrative. This approach is used to curb our tendencies to make conceptual leaps (Charmaz, 2006) and facilitates becoming more familiar with data. Focused coding is conceptual and is used to synthesize and explain larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). The
coding was completed independently by two research assistants and the lead author. In a collaborative process, analytical decisions were made about categorizing the data into inclusive and comprehensive themes. Throughout this process, we refined codes. Themes and subthemes were identified within each form of oppression. For instance, under exploitation, the two major themes included workplace-related exploitation and economic exploitation. Within workplace exploitation, several subthemes were present including differential wages and unpaid wages, differential expectations based on documentation status, poor working conditions, and train own replacements. The analytical strategy and use of multiple coders enhanced the trustworthiness of the study (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). In addition, rich quotes are included to support the themes, thus supporting the credibility of the findings (Charmaz, 2006).

**Results**

Each of the five forms of oppression was present across participant narratives. Collectively, participants shared multiple examples of how they experienced exploitation, violence, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness in their everyday lives through their interactions with individuals in their place of employment and the broader community. Often the women’s narratives illustrated that the forms of oppression are intertwined; that is, narratives were coded as multiple forms of oppression. Instances of horizontal oppression or intracommunity subjugation were also present in their narratives (i.e., oppressive situations where the perpetrator was a member of his or her own ethnic group or of Latino ethnicity). Refer to Table 1 for a summary of the findings.

**Exploitation**

Latina immigrants shared experiences of exploitation both in the workplace and in economic matters outside of the workplace. Within the workplace, there were different expectations for undocumented workers. Compared with non-Latinos or Latinos who were residents, undocumented Latinas reported working more hours, receiving lower wages, working longer hours, unpaid overtime or unpaid hours, being underpaid, and not receiving vacation time or wage raises. A participant shared, “A mí nunca me pagaron el overtime; trabajamos de 6 de la mañana… a veces salía a las cinco de la tarde. Y nada más me pagaban ocho horas.” [“They never paid me overtime; I worked from 6 in the morning… sometimes I got out until five in the afternoon. And they only paid me eight hours.”] Another participant highlights the powerlessness she experienced as she was aware that she was exploited due to her documentation status:

In my job… it was an unfair deal because for example all the people that were working, at that time you could count the people who had documents, so the employers knew and there was a lot of abuse. The employers because they knew [we were undocumented], they said you need [the job], accept [what it is] or leave. Then, the salaries, I had the same salary for seven years. The wages were frozen. But… it was only for us who did not have
Table 1. Forms of Oppression: Definition and Examples From a Sample of Latinas (N = 32).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of oppression</th>
<th>Themes/subthemes or examples from data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>Workplace related</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Differential wages: lower wages, long hours, unpaid overtime, no vacation time, unpaid hours</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Poor working conditions: no breaks, short lunch breaks (one microwave for hundreds of employees)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Different expectations for undocumented workers (i.e., work more) compared with others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Train their own replacements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Economic exploitation/abuse</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1. Extra fees for medical attention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Lawyer fees</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Car impounded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Verbal abuse and intimidation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Threat of deportation/job insecurity/harassed to work harder (psychological abuse)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Sexual harassment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Bullied</td>
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<td>Neighborhood</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Threat of deportation by neighbors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Sexual harassment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Horizontal violence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Verbal abuse at work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Physical violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marginalization</td>
<td>1. Limit access to social services: AHCCCS (Medicaid), general health care, GED program, day care for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Participation in society</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Not admitted into store, not able to return or purchase items at store, assumptions about their purchasing ability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Unable to continue with education or work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural imperialism</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Must speak English</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Scolded/belittled for speaking Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Judged for childbearing and child-rearing practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>In all cases, participants feel powerless due to their documentation status and limited English proficiency. They fear losing their job, detainment, and deportation</td>
</tr>
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</table>
papers because new employees got hired and they were paid just the same like someone who had been working there for years. [The employers said], if you like it, if not you can leave. But you realize it, you understand me? Why it is they overwork us; that we do triple the work that others do. . . . You see that they are discriminating the workers that are [undocumented]. (Participant 32, 30 years old)

Around the time that LAWA was passed, participants reported that they were asked to train individuals who would replace them or take their position. Employers were aware that work raids to identify undocumented immigrants were being conducted; thus, they were replacing undocumented employees with employees who would pass the e-verify check. The practice of asking undocumented employees to train their replacements was exploitative as women were asked to transfer their skills to other workers without receiving additional compensation and they ultimately lost their jobs to the individuals they trained. Another participant shares her experience:

But he knew that they were coming to verify the papers; what he did was to hire one with papers and fire two without papers per week to start replacing the people. . . . But it was because he knew that something was going to happen; he had to take out all the ones that did not have papers. He said, to replace them with “good people” supposedly. . . . And the new [employees] came and you had to teach them . . . but I would say it is not our duty to teach these people. They should have people whose job it is to train others. . . . There were many injustices. (Participant 11, 28 years old)

Poor working conditions—such as no breaks or short lunch breaks—were common. Women reported the intense exhaustion they experienced as they were unable to rest while being expected to work long hours. In addition, they were not provided with the protective clothing or equipment needed to complete their work tasks safely. Such environments increase the risk of injury.

[Where] I worked . . . they paid us $5.25 [an hour] when the other companies were paying more . . . well I earned $190 per week. I paid the phone and paid the rent every month, and then I paid the food and for gas . . . Only Mexicans worked there and they exploited us. . . . You got in there, you were standing, the one next to you was working hard. Fast, if you did it slow everything would stop, sometimes they saw the lines going slower and the manager came and would say “hurry up and do it fast.” . . . [Then I was moved to another position], where you had to make a lid, where you had to pull two pieces of plastic together until they clicked. So I had my fingers very, very marked. The skin [of my fingers] was breaking, so the same plastic was [pulling the skin off]. . . . [There was a tape that they gave you to protect the fingers, but they did not give it to everyone.] Well I would get depressed . . . I said everyone has the right to [the tape]. But [the supervisor] only gave it to her coworkers that were her friends. . . . I saw that they put [it] on their [uninjured] fingers and we did not. (Participant 26, 31 years old)

Exploitation in the workplace leads to hardship for Latinas’ families; as described above, women were responsible for paying living expenses, but made less money than others for the same work. Participants also reported that it was challenging to find day
care for their children when they were expected to work long and uncertain hours or that it was unfeasible to pay for day care due to their low wages. For instance, the following participant shared that she was expected to be available to work at any time, and it was challenging to find child care for her daughter.

... They changed my shift; it affected me because of my daughter. And then my mother was taking care of my daughter, she took care of her the days she did not have dialysis. And I struggled. It changed everything. And I said, I know that work is work and I have to learn to have the schedule you [need]. I said I have seniority and earned that [morning] shift and you should respect that; plus it is not a job where you really have to change the schedule. (Participant 39, 31 years old)

Outside of the workplace, economic exploitation was reported through extra fees for medical attention, legal services, bank lending, and car impounding. The following participant shared that her family was a victim of predatory lending; they were charged additional fees for their home loan.

When we got our home, there were several things I did not understand. ... And a lot of things I said [to my husband] I feel that they are cheating us... And three months ago we got a letter where they said that there was discrimination in that bank ... and ... like they filed a lawsuit and there is a complaint and we were on the list of people who were discriminated ... they charged us more than what we were supposed to pay. (Participant 21, 42 years old)

Another participant shared her experience with the police and impound lot:

One time the police stopped me because they said my tail light was out. And the truck had a ball that hid the license plates so they stopped me ... and they took the truck for a month. It was unfair ... I had to pay a lot of money to get my truck back. Like a thousand dollars. [Facilitator: Why did they take it? What reason did they tell you?] Because I did not have a license. They did give [the truck] back to me, even though I did not have a license. (Participant 12, 51 years old)

Violence

Violence involves physical attacks as well as harassment, ridicule, and intimidation. These actions serve to stigmatize Latinas and affect their physical, social, and psychological integrity. In the workplace, Latinas reported verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and being bullied. In the following quote, one participant shared the verbal abuse that she had to endure at work; this violence occurred within the context of exploitation as she was doing the job of a supervisor, but not being compensated for the work.

I worked [in a] company where we did mailing service, we mailed things for companies like their bills. So in a short time I learned ... watching the mechanic [how he prepared] the machines. ... It was a single mechanic for a lot of machines, and since I learned how
to prepare the machines, they [let me] do the job of the mechanic. And so they sometimes would tell me, “Come to do this machine, do this, put money on the machine for the postage” and all of that I learned to do it. So there was a time I was doing the work of the assistant manager. And there was a lot of discrimination because if I did something wrong, they did not bring it up lightly, they yelled at me. One time they even made me cry. I had to take my things and leave. I left crying because they talked to me in a rude manner... They paid me $5.50 an hour and they paid the managers $14.00 an hour.

(Participant 14, 40 years old)

Oppression through violence goes beyond direct victimization as it is experienced through a constant fear that violence may occur solely based on the participant’s identity. In this study, participants’ documentation status, phenotype (i.e., observable physical characteristics such as skin tone), and Spanish monolingualism heightened their vulnerability to violence. For instance, participants report that employers demand higher production levels from Latinas under the threat of deportation or to keep their jobs. Those who were threatened in this manner lived in a constant state of fear of deportation. Participants’ jobs were held over them as a way to make them work more, harder, or faster: “Pues si a nosotros si nos gritaban, ósea nos decían, si querían el trabajo más rápido o ‘Apúrense porque ya los necesitamos, rápido, muevan las manos.’” [“So yes, they shouted at us, they told us, if you wanted the job go faster or ‘Hurry up because we need them fast, move your hands.’”] The following participant’s narrative illustrates workplace exploitation, verbal abuse, sexual harassment by her supervisor, bullying behavior by a coworker and supervisor, as well as the constant fear she experienced as she wondered what would happen next. Her feelings of powerlessness are evident as she shares that she was excluded from making decisions or having an opinion because of her documentation status.

The supervisor... humiliated me... they knew that I did not have my papers in order here... At the beginning he started saying why didn’t I get married to one of the workers, an elderly man who could get me a green card... I tried to ignore him. And I do not speak a lot of English and [the supervisor], um, he said things like suggesting that he wanted something with me. He is a married man, so I tried to focus on my job, I tried to make him respect me, and I respected him and nothing else. [The supervisor] realized that I was not going to pay attention to what he suggested. He started to get angry at me because... I never paid attention to him. So he did a lot of things to me... made me cry, screamed, he screamed at me, he took me to the office for anything, a woman was his accomplice and they did a lot of things to me... And they always were saying, things like, “you are nothing here.” They would hold meetings about the work, they would leave me out, because I did not have papers, I did not have the right to know. And they wanted me to do the hardest jobs, the most difficult jobs. And I, because of my children, I endured so much. And this woman, his accomplice, she made me feel really bad because she knew that he would not protect me. She always did a lot of things to me, if a job went wrong, they blamed it on me. And this supervisor always took me to the office, and he started to say a lot of things, ugly, bad words... And I said to him no, I did not do it and I tried to explain to him and that I did not make that mistake, and what he said was, “The next time that you try to defend yourself and do not accept your mistakes, I am going to fire you.” [And I thought] what is next, what other mistreatment, what other thing are they going to
blame me for. . . I was always thinking what are they going to do now, what are they going to say . . . what other reason are they going to find to keep bothering me. And he was a person who always got behind me . . . I was working and suddenly . . . he was behind me, and he asked . . . I remember that he always asked me what perfume I used. I never told him what perfume I used, I simply said I do not know the name . . . I do not know the name and he would say, you smell pretty. . . . but he was really close to me. That made me feel so uncomfortable . . . knowing that he was a married man and he was the supervisor he needed to respect me. Because I acted in a way that deemed respect. . . . there was no reason for him to disrespect me in any way. Why did he think he had the right to bother me? . . . I asked God, My God help me. Calm this man down. What is happening with him? He has to accept that I am a mother first before a woman and I should not have to sleep with him to keep my job and move forward with my children. I want to work fairly, honestly, and help my children. (Participant 9, 36 years old)

In their neighborhoods, participants experienced violence through threats of deportation, sexual harassment, and verbal and physical abuse. Threats of deportation were directed toward participants and their children (see Ayón, 2016), and mothers must contend both with their own fear of being deported and their children’s fear. In the following quote, a participant shared how her fear of deportation placed her in a constant state of insecurity. This fear was underscored when a neighbor threatened to call immigration after they had a disagreement in the laundry room of their apartment complex:

. . . she started saying bad words like damn Mexican, you better not say anything or I will call immigration so they can take you she said. And I said call them I will wait for them right here you call them. But it feels very bad because they see your face and they threaten you with that. Um, I was very scared because I did not know if she was really going to do it. I answered her like that, yes call them, I am going to wait for them, but the truth is that I was very scared that she would really do it. I was just waiting to see if she really would call them. (Participant 27, 31 years old)

An example of sexual violence was shared by a Latina whose neighbor would expose himself to her. She shared, “Un muchacho de allá de enfrente . . . se exhibió desnudo. Fueron dos veces, la primera vez da dé cuenta que yo me hice como que no lo vi porque me dio mucho miedo.” [“A young man from over there in the front . . . he exhibited himself naked. Twice, the first time I pretended that I did not see because I was too scared.”] She went on to share that she called the police, but they were unable to find the individual. In an example of horizontal violence, a participant shared how she was physically assaulted by other Latinas who were U.S. residents:

My brother-in-law’s wife . . . and myself we did not get along very well. And one time I was pregnant . . . and she went with her friends . . . and they cut my hair and they left me all scratched. . . . And so, I told them crying and scared that I was going to call the police, and then they said that I should not call because they would only ignore me because I was illegal and they were legal. (Participant 36, 33 years old)
Marginalization

Marginalization results from acts that prevent whole groups of people from meaningful participation in society through material deprivation or inhibiting individuals’ capacities. Participants reported material deprivation as they were prevented from accessing care and support services. Barriers to accessing health care were prominent in participants’ narratives. Due to participants’ limited English proficiency or undocumented status, they were subjected to poor customer service (e.g., prejudice and negative attitudes from frontline workers and long waiting periods) when attempting to access public health insurance for their U.S. citizen children. A participant shared, “Como yo preguntaba por ayuda, y me decían okay tu hablas español, no te entendemos espérate y deja que pasen a los que . . . les entendemos.” [“Because I asked for help, and they said okay you speak Spanish, we do not understand you, wait and let the others that we understand go first.”] Another participant reported waiting 7 hr before she was helped, whereas another participant was told “porque no se van a su país” [“Why you do not go to your country”]. In these examples, participants were treated in a discriminatory and disrespectful manner because of their documentation status and limited English proficiency; they are powerless because they feel “voiceless.” The quotes illustrate that they have no recourse because they do not speak English and are not familiar enough with systems of care to know how to file formal complaints. Furthermore, as Latino families are marginalized from public health insurance and often live in extreme poverty, their children’s health is placed at risk. Similarly, participants shared that they were prevented from accessing child care services for their children and enrolling in GED programs, and reported poor quality of care in medical offices. Participants attributed these experiences to their documentation status.

In addition, participants’ narratives illustrate that they were prevented from meaningful participation in other social aspects of daily interactions. Individuals were not permitted to enter stores, were treated poorly (e.g., cashiers ignore Latinas or refuse to speak to them in Spanish), or assumptions were made about their purchasing abilities (“that item is very expensive”). One woman shares her experience of discrimination and marginalization:

In the [supermarket] the cashiers are very ugly. I do not really like to go but I know the ones who are like that. That they answer your questions, and the ones who are mean when they are checking out or something. Like there most of them are Chicanos, only the Chicana cashiers have very bad manners. And I do not like to be there. (Participant 8, 35 years old)

Latina immigrants are unable to exchange or purchase items due to lack of an acceptable identification card or limited English. “Me dijo bien feo no es que aquí no hay nadie que hable español. Y yo me regresé con el artículo, no podía cambiarlo.” [“He told me in a very ugly way that nobody there spoke Spanish. So I went back home with the item, I could not exchange it.”] Another participant shared that her Mexican matricula or ID was not accepted as a valid form of identification when buying alcohol.
Participants’ opportunities to build their capacities are limited or hindered as they are unable to find employment or continue with their education. Participants have the capacity and will to engage in these activities but are prevented from doing so due to anti-immigrant legislation. “Pues como la SB1070 . . . Ya no puedo seguir trabajando . . . [Le impacta a mis hijos] . . . porque pues si no trabajo . . . no le puedo dar lo que ocupan.” [“Because like the SB1070 . . . I cannot keep working . . . [It impacts my children] . . . because if I don’t work . . . I cannot give them what they need.”] The following participant shares the frustration and helplessness she experienced when she learned that she could not continue with her education due to her documentation status.

And I said only because of papers, I cannot keep studying, I will not be able to finish high school. It gave me a lot of anger, it made me mad but at the same time I said one day I will have it, I know, and I will keep studying and, I am not going to stop here. But it did . . . make me feel a lot of anger at the same time because it was just because of the papers I could not keep moving forward. I felt tied. Like tied from my hands and feet. Like I could not do it, I felt helpless. (Participant 4, 24 years old)

### Cultural Imperialism

When individuals assume that their lived experience or the dominant culture is the only way or the right way to live one’s life, they are practicing cultural imperialism. Participants report experiencing cultural imperialism as they are expected to speak English and are scolded or belittled for speaking Spanish. Shortly after their arrival to the United States, Latina immigrants learn that speaking Spanish is not acceptable; it is a form of shame. In the following case, the participant indicated that because she did not speak English, she did not have a voice in her classroom. “[The teacher said,] ‘Please don’t speak Spanish here in the classroom and it’s only English.’ And I was like I don’t know how . . . so I didn’t speak.” Another participant shared,

I do not feel good here like I have never felt free. I do not know why [maybe] because it’s not . . . is not one’s country. And one thinks why did I come? Well to work. But for example . . . it’s not . . . you feel, it’s not the same, it’s not the same. For example in a job that I had . . . the manager scolded us in a very ugly way and shouted at us because she heard us speaking Spanish. (Participant 3, 36 years old)

In addition, Latinas report that they are judged for their childbearing and child-rearing practices. A participant went to inquire about her children’s public health insurance; she was worried that they were going to lose coverage. The agency employee made a comment about the number of children she had:

And then I went to apply and I said “hey, I brought my application” and they sent me another application and said that I had to come again. So then the lady told me not to worry about it . . . “you keep having children but they still help you anyway.” And she said it in a way that I said, why does she have to answer me like that? (Participant 41, 29 years old)
Another participant shared that she felt belittled by a doctor for not speaking English when she sought medical attention for one of her children. In addition, she felt that the doctor questioned her intelligence and ability to assess her child’s health because she did not use Western medicine criteria.

Yeah and that time I felt like that, discriminated because of the language . . . mainly because for my level of education because I think that um she . . . she was talking to me like that . . . like you do not understand me. She almost said, “Are you stupid?” Because my son had a temperature; sometimes you do not need a thermometer to know the child has temperature. And she was stubborn. She insisted that if I did not have a thermometer how would I know that he had a high temperature? I think there is not a lot of science needed to know that a child has a fever. She was . . . trying to say that I was like dumb. (Participant 37, 35 years old)

A common thread through many of the participants’ narratives is the differential treatment they experienced due to their limited English proficiency. Another participant cried as she shared how she was accused of not attending to her child’s education:

In my son’s school, there was a teacher who wanted to tell me that I had to help my son more. She sent me all the papers in English and I told her . . . I repeatedly said that they had to change the messages because I know they do have them in Spanish. So, we sat down to talk to the teacher, the interpreter and me . . . and it felt harsh what they were saying to me . . . almost like [they were accusing me] that I was not keeping track of my son. I said that I have done it; that I was aware of my son’s work. That perhaps there are some things that, I will not deny it, I did not understand but I always keep an eye on my son. And there I felt that both were attacking me . . . I felt they were very hard. I even cried there, I do not know . . . because of desperation, but I felt bad. From then on I said no, I will have to move forward. (Participant 44, 33 years old)

Powerlessness

We found powerlessness to be interwoven into the other forms of oppression, as opposed to being a form of oppression that stands alone. Thus, we have integrated powerlessness throughout the sections above. Women’s narratives of exploitation, violence, marginalization, and cultural imperialism were accentuated by their feelings of powerlessness to change the oppressive situations in which they found themselves. For some one with the power (i.e., the voice, the cultural and political capital, the resources) to change their situation, they may be freed from oppression. Yet, women continually reported that they had knowledge that they were being oppressed, understood that it was wrong, and remained powerless to do anything about it. Although many participants eventually find the strength to stand up for themselves (see Ayón, Wagaman, & Philbin), many also feel vulnerable as they are subjected to injustice. Some common threads throughout the narratives are participants’ ethnicity (their appearance of looking Mexican), limited English proficiency, and their immigrant and documentation status; these factors made them more susceptible to oppression. These conditions inhibit their capacities and decision-making power; and they endure poor treatment often
without being able to change their circumstances. Participants fear losing their job, being detained and deported. As demonstrated earlier, narratives illustrating powerlessness overlap with other forms of oppression. Powerlessness was evident in many forms throughout the narratives and added to women’s feelings of being discriminated against, belittled, oppressed, and helpless.

Discussion

Latina immigrant mothers in this study indicated that they experienced the five forms of oppression outlined by Young (1990) in their day-to-day interactions. However, in this study, powerlessness was found to be integral to the other forms of oppression, rather than a form of oppression that stands on its own. Women specifically reported experiencing oppression due to the political climate, their documentation status, language limitations, and Latino characteristics. The forms of oppression inflicted upon them often intersected, building upon one another, and exacerbating the lived experience of oppression that they were powerless to stop. Similarly, their intersecting nondominant identities—such as gender, ethnicity, nativity, language proficiency, documentation status, cultural beliefs, socioeconomic status, and work status (being paid “under-the-table” or in marginalized professions with little oversight and recourse)—also serve to both broaden and intensify the oppression that they experienced. Their oppression is broader because it occurs on many levels: Women are discriminated against at work or in society based on their documentation status; at the grocery store, based on their limited language proficiency; and at the doctor’s office, based on their cultural beliefs at the doctor’s office. These experiences are intense because each of their nondominant identities builds upon the others. A participant is paid less at work, for example, because she is a woman, Latina, born outside of the United States, has limited English proficiency, and is undocumented; these same intersecting identities intensify her vulnerability to sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Mothers were specifically subjected to economic exploitation across all facets of their lives. Not only were they paid less and expected to endure longer hours in the workplace, they were charged extra fees for services (such as medical and legal services), subjected to predatory lending practices and car impounding. Their economic power, therefore, is limited both in terms of their earning potential and spending capabilities. Discriminatory policies and laws, even those intended to affect organizations rather than individuals, had substantial impact on undocumented Latina workers who both lost their jobs and were expected to train their replacements. Violence and sexual harassment in the workplace were also common; this finding is consistent with previous research (Krieger et al., 2006; Waugh, 2010).

Latinas reported that they felt powerless to speak up against the violence that they experienced due to their documentation status, limited English proficiency, and need for money to support their families. Powerlessness was dissimilar from the other forms of oppression in this study as it was woven within and across all of the narratives describing other forms of oppression. In this sample, powerlessness may be better conceptualized as a factor that intensifies other forms of oppression. That is, due to their intersecting
nondominant identities, women were powerless to counter exploitation, violence, marginalization, and cultural imperialism; because they are powerless, these forms of oppression continue, build on one another, and affect every facet of women’s lives.

Although motherhood can be considered a dominant identity within the majority culture, Latina mothers in this study experienced motherhood as a factor that intersected with their nondominant identities to exacerbate the oppression they experienced. Often, women continued to work in unsafe, violent, and exploitative conditions to provide for their children. Financial instability due to economic exploitation and marginalization affected the participant’s family, including her children. Child care was difficult to obtain due to cost as well as long and unpredictable work hours. Women in this study described cultural imperialism, wherein they were treated as unfit mothers, not provided with needed services for following their cultural traditions or speaking their native language. Finally, rather than being celebrated as mothers, Latinas were shamed for bearing children. The negative stereotype of Latinas as having too many children left them vulnerable to further discrimination. These experiences place mothers at risk for high levels of stress and psychological distress, which in turn may affect their parenting and emotional availability to children (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). Thus, given that in the Latino culture, women are the center of the home, the oppression experienced by Latina mothers and the subsequent sequelae of mental health may indeed have a profound effect on the entire family unit.

Although these narratives highlight negative situations for Latinas, they also shed light on their ability to endure injustices for the betterment of their families. In line with Latina gender roles, women were devoted mothers, self-sacrificing, and modest (Valencia-Garcia et al., 2008). Latina mothers demonstrated their resiliency by finding their inner strength in their commitment to their children and to continue to strive forward despite injustices for their families. Consistent with the literature, Latino mothers were willing to endure a lot of hardships and take many risks to secure the well-being of their children and families (Ayón & Quiroz, 2013; Chavez, Lopez, Englebrecht, & Anguiano, 2012; Valencia-Garcia et al., 2008).

In conclusion, findings from this study have significant implications for immigrant Latina mothers in the United States, particularly those who are undocumented, as findings reveal they face multiple forms of oppression that negatively affect every facet of their lives. This is perhaps most apparent in the workplace where laws and policies must be in place to protect both documented and undocumented workers. It is further necessary to eliminate the wage gap for Latina workers and raise the minimum wage to one that would allow these workers to support their families. At the same time, unsafe working conditions should not be tolerated for any employee. Clear policies for reporting unsafe work environments, harassment, and bullying should be available in multiple languages and should ensure that all workers have power within the system. Practitioners working with the Latino immigrant communities need to assess women’s needs comprehensively (interactions with family, community, work) as well as the resources they rely on to overcome challenges. As evident in the present study, women were resilient when faced with multiple forms of oppression. Yet, they also experience heightened stress, which can take a toll on their physical and mental health placing the
entire family unit at risk. Access to mental health services is imperative for Latina women to address the deleterious consequences of living and working in hostile environments. In addition to emotional support, practitioners need to connect mothers to community resources where they can access advocacy and educational resources.

Findings from this study can be used to inform future immigration legislation. This study reveals the oppressive conditions that result from restrictive policies and poor implementation of such policies. Future immigration policies should aim to minimize the unintended consequences borne by immigrant mothers. Advocacy campaigns to teach Latina mothers what their rights are in all facets of American life—in schools, stores, workplaces, and doctor’s offices—are also important. Future research should consider the experiences of mothers who reside in states that are passing integrationist policies versus restrictive immigration policies, to examine the long-term impact on mothers and their children. Such information can be used to support comprehensive immigration reform. Although it may be difficult to end discriminatory practices and attitudes, promoting interaction among dominant and nondominant groups and challenging discriminatory discourse is an important step in promoting understanding and achieving justice for all.

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