

Women's Stories

The Latina experience in Somerville

*“Some of the things I know,
I know only because older women have told me their secrets,
I have lived and am living long
so that I can tell my secrets to younger women.
That’s the reason we women go on improving.”*

-Maya Angelou



Rebecca Hayes
Urban Borderlands
Tufts University
Fall 2006

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
A note on interpersonal relations.....	6
Narrators.....	7
Traditional gender roles and women in the home.....	11
The immigration experience.....	13
Community organizing and activism.....	18
Race, gender, and socioeconomic class.....	24
The next generation of women: <i>raising our daughters</i>	29
Suggestions for future research	31
Conclusions	31
Sources and interviews.....	33

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible if not for the inspiration, guidance, and support of many people. First I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to the seven women who welcomed me into their homes and lives and shared with me their stories, memories, and thoughts. I feel blessed by every opportunity that I was given to spend time with them listening, questioning, and learning.

Beatrice

Zuleika

Nadia

Mayra

Rosa Maria

Consuelo

Elsie

I would also like to thank the staff of Centro Presente who were supportive throughout my project, my professor, Deborah Pacini-Hernandez, whose work and leadership has made this project possible, our class teaching assistant, Sebastian Chaskel, and the entire class of Urban Borderland students. Lastly I would like to thank my mom, dad, and my sister who continues to inspire me every day to be a better woman.

Introduction

I have always loved listening to women's stories. Whether they are stories of my grandmother, hairdresser, mother, sister, friends, or young girls sitting around a campfire, I am amazed by the strength of women in a community sharing their experiences and supporting each other. I have grown up with a heightened awareness of my identity as a woman, the ways in which my gender affects how others perceive me, and how I understand myself. However many women have never been asked what it means to be a woman, or thought about how their gender has affected their experiences.

My hope is that this project accomplishes several goals. The first is to create a space where Latina women of Somerville are able to tell their stories. Many of the women I interviewed had never been asked questions like the ones I was asking them. This gives them a chance to reflect upon their own experiences in a new way. Additionally, I hope that this project brings attention to the essential role that women hold in their homes and communities. I was impressed by how many women bravely venture outside traditional gender roles to take on leadership and activist initiatives within the community. Lastly, I hope that this project reveals the wide diversity of Latina women's experiences in Somerville. This was the basis for my investigation: How have the varying backgrounds of Latina immigrant women in Somerville affected their diverse experiences of immigration, and how are their experiences interrelated?

Throughout the semester I have attempted to address this question along with several others. Who are these women? Where do they work? With whom do they spend their time? What are their concerns, responsibilities, and aspirations? I conducted seven recorded interviews with Latina women in the Somerville community and sought out opportunities to engage women in discussions about their experiences in informal settings as well. I referenced on past Urban Borderlands reports, books written on the Latino community and immigrants in New England, and several essays about the experiences of Latina women.

What I found: these women are mothers, leaders, workers, the suffering, community activists, students, the ones that take care of everyone. They are Latina, black, white, Salvadoran, Puerto Rican, undocumented, married, Christian, well educated, poor, pregnant. The experiences of Latina women in Somerville, while they share deep

underlying commonalities, are vastly distinct reflecting the great diversity of the Latino community as a whole.

I have identified several of these commonalities or reoccurring themes that I found in many of the interviews. The themes will be discussed and analyzed within the context of the women's varying backgrounds (race, citizenship, culture, socio-economic status, and education) and how their different backgrounds have affected their immigration and adaptation experience. First I will be discussing traditional gender roles for Latina women and the importance of home life and family, then in the next section I will look at the immigration experience and how this has been shaped by women's different backgrounds, next I discuss women's role in community activism and political engagement, the following section looks at the interplay of race, socioeconomic class, and identity of Latina women, and the last section deals with the next generation of Latina women and raising daughters.

The stories I have heard throughout my project demonstrate the diversity of the ways that Latina women have experienced immigration in Somerville. Every community is diverse and dynamic, however history usually represents only the dominant voice of the community. When someone thinks of the "Latino experience" women's perspectives are excluded and when the "Latina experience" is address sometimes the diversity of their experiences due varying backgrounds of race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, citizenship, and education are ignored. I hope to draw attention to the diversity of Latina women's experiences with immigration and life in the Somerville community.

A meaningful interaction that occurred after one of my interviews was when a woman commented that she liked the project because no one had ever asked her questions about her life before. She was concerned that she was not able to answer well because she had never thought about her life in that way before. In this moment it became clear to me that this is what I wanted my project to accomplish. I wanted this to become a space where Latina women in Somerville could have their voices heard. Because as women, especially minority and immigrant women, their stories and their experiences are not the standard that is most often valued by society.

Through sharing stories new voices can be heard. Through the sharing of stories we learn to appreciate ourselves and care for others.

A note on interpersonal relations

During the interviewing process for my project I became personally connected with women from completely different backgrounds than my own. I wanted to do everything I could to make every woman feel comfortable. Most of the time I felt that these interactions resulted in a beautiful exchange between people of different lives and the crossing of harsh racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. However, sometimes differences are irreconcilable and this reality was never so painfully apparent as in many women's resistance to being interviewed.

As I understand the issue, much of the resistance to being interviewed comes from the fear of many currently undocumented immigrants or people who at one point were undocumented, that their stories and information would somehow reach immigration authorities resulting in their imprisonment or expulsion from the country. This fear is legitimate, real, and unsettling. Here is a project in which the goal is to make voices heard and validated, confronting the reality that many of the people whom I wished to interview want nothing more than to remain invisible.

It was not unusual for me to notice someone's body become tense when I pulled out my small tape recorder and consent forms. This unfortunate reality caused me to reflect upon the implications of being undocumented in a country that is unfortunately quite hostile to immigrants at this moment. Additionally I realized how uncomfortable I am with the fact that I myself am perceived as a reflection of our society's current attitude towards immigrants, just because I am US citizen, regardless of my personal feelings about immigration. My position in society and what I represent to others as a white, upper-class, U.S. citizen was never so clear to me.

However, this experience also reinforced the importance of projects like this. A space for immigrants to share their experiences with a larger community can only result in increased understanding and tolerance. I hope that out of fear can come solidarity and from silence, validation. I hope that the women who I interview value their own experiences as much as I have, enough to think others might be interested in listening to their stories as well.

The Narrators

Beatrice

Beatrice Senior is 42 years old and originally from Venezuela. She has lived in Brighton for seven years and currently is a community organizer for Centro Presente an organization that provides services for immigrants in the Cambridge, Somerville, and greater Boston areas. She has several other family members living in different parts of the United States, Venezuela, and Europe.



Zuleika



Zuleik Andrade is 23 years old resident of Cambridge. She was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico, and when she was two years old she and her parents moved to New Hampshire. Zuleika recently graduated from Emmanuel College with a major in Spanish Literature and then began working at Centro Presente. She started off working in the legal department and now she is the director of the adult education program.

Nadia

Nadia Pineda is a 24 year-old, married woman who is originally from Venezuela. She works with the legal department at Centro Presente. She was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and lived there until she was 19. Nadia went to the Universidad Central de Venezuela to study medicine for two years before she switched programs to modern languages. She did a study abroad program in Germany and was accepted to study in the modern languages and multilingual communication program to become translator for English, Spanish, and German. At the end of the program the students are supposed to do an internship in a foreign country- so she applied to work in the legal department of Centro Presente. She has been living in Boston since August of this year.



Mayra

Mayra Valladares was born in El Salvador in 1970. She came to the U.S. with her husband, first to Dallas, Texas where she was waiting to go through the legalization process (her husband had been in the US for 17 years when he requested for her *residencia* or legal residency) then she came to Somerville. She has now been living in Somerville for two years. She was working in a laundry mat, but now is no longer working because she is expecting a child in May. She has four children currently living in El Salvador with her parents.

Rosa Maria

Rosa Maria Aguilar is from El Salvador and has lived in Boston for 19 years. She is the mother of three children, two daughters 17 and 14 years old, and an 11 years old son. She was married in Boston and her husband, Marcos Garcia, was one of the original founders of CORES. She and her children live with her husband and her mother in Somerville. She is a leader with in the Latino community and a community organizer at CORES, the Center for Refugees from El Salvador in Somerville..



Consuelo

Consuelo Perez was born in Peru and immigrated to the U.S. with her grandparents 1987 when she was 25 years old. In Peru she went through primary school and attended a

university where she studied medicine. She did not finish the program in Peru because of political problems occurring in the university, and therefore came to the United States where she began to work. She worked in Dunkin' Donuts, at a school for the SCALE

program (English classes), and lastly at Brigham and Women's Hospital as a phlebotomist. She went to school to become a technician and worked at Massachusetts General Hospital. She is married and her husband Steve spends most of his time working in Japan. She is the mother of two school-age daughters.

Elsie

Elsie Lopez was born in Houston Texas in 1983. Her father was a legal resident and her mother was waiting to receive her citizenship. Her parents divorced when she was four years old, and since her mother was not yet a legal citizen she had to return to El Salvador with four-year old Elsie. Elsie grew up in El Salvador,



completing all of her schooling there as well. Elsie returned to the United States in 1999 to visit her relatives for two months. After she returned to El Salvador she fell in love and gave birth to her daughter. When her daughter was one and a half she decided to move back to the US to work and save money for her daughter's future since she had double citizenship from the US and El Salvador. Now she is in the process of obtaining legal status for her daughter so she can bring her to the US. Elsie currently lives with her aunt, uncle, and cousins in Somerville and works in a factory.

Traditional gender roles and women in their homes

Two related themes that came up repeatedly in the interviews among women of varying race, class, and immigration status were motherhood and the role a woman plays in her family. Many women associated their feminine identity most concretely with their role as a mother within the context of the home. Whether this is through cooking their family traditional Salvadoran food like *pupusas* (tortilla filled with cheese or meat served with cabbage and salsa) or dressing their children to go out to a *quinceañera* (the fifteenth birthday party) women play key roles in preserving the culture and keeping the family together.

Women describe their mothers in a variety of ways. Several of the women referred to their own mothers as “*la que cuida todo el mundo*” or the one who takes care of everyone. Zuleika, who used that phrase to describe her mother, asserted that her

mother was the heart and the center of her family, and family is a central focus in her mother’s life. The relationship was one of mutual importance, and the importance of family is



something that her mother has passed down to her daughter.

Many women’s lives revolve around their family and the responsibilities they have in their home. Beatrice Senior described her mother as a self-sacrificing woman, someone who is always giving to others. One of the traits that she emphasized about her mother was her role as someone to confide in. Other women had memories of their

mother sharing the responsibilities of the household work. One of these women, Nadia, described her family as non-traditional with respect to gender roles in many Latin American homes. Everyone in the family worked, her mother as a nurse and her father as an artist and her parents shared the work of the house equally, which she identified as atypical for Latin American families. Although some had non-traditional situations in the home, one can tell from all the stories of the women I interviewed, their home life and family were fundamental parts of their identity as a woman.

Although this will be further examined in the section about immigration, it is important to note the role that family plays in the lives of immigrants who have left behind their children, parents, siblings, or spouse in their country of origin. The responsibilities of motherhood transcend national borders. Most immigrants, including women, say that they have come to this country to work and save money to better the future of their children. Their children remain the first priority in their lives and the motivation for these women to hold down, one, two, even three jobs at a time. As one woman, Mayra, who works to in Somerville to send money to her children and family in El Salvador, expressed in the following quote,

*Mi vida es trabajar...
Ahora quiero descansar un pocito,
ya luce por mis hijos.
Directamente uno lo hace por los hijos, por darles comida.
Digo yo mi vida ha sido muy... solo de trabajar.*

(Translated from Spanish)

My life is work...
Now I would like to rest a little,
I already fought for my children,
Really, one does it for their children, to give them food.
I say my life has been very... only of work.
(Valladares/ Hayes 2006)

The immigration experience

Latina women in Somerville have come to the United States because of diverse motives and through many different means. Some women have been a part of a process of legalization in which they were requested to receive legal residence by a “sponsor” either a family members or a spouse, some women came on their own financial means or with a student visa on a program, some women have come *por tierra*, or “by land” (an euphemism for undocumented) and they were brought across the border by coyotes, or in the backs of trucks. Many of the women said that they came to help ensure a better life for their children, and some said they came because of opportunities for themselves. Despite these differences, a recurrent theme emerged in the answers of the immigrant women who I interviewed. Many of them expressed that they experienced a lack of support upon arriving in the U.S. due to the separation of their family, but that the community organizations that they found in Somerville helped provide the support they were missing. Here I have selected several stories of women’s experiences with migration, illustrating many different aspects of this event in women’s lives.

Crossing the border

Crossing the *frontera*, as it is called in Spanish, and coming to the U.S. without legal documents is an extremely risky and dangerous undertaking. It is not safe for any immigrants; however, women traveling alone are especially vulnerable to abuse. Rosa Maria, who now works with and serves the needs of many undocumented immigrants through working at CORES in East Somerville, shared her story of coming to the U.S. by land without documents.

Vine por tierra o “I came by land” is how she introduced the story. Over the next several minutes I learned of how Rosa Maria was a victim of harassment and abuse by both the coyotes and the immigration border officials. She said that many women are abused, raped, and intimidated. She was taken advantage of when she was crossing the border between Mexico and the United States through Tijuana. She was told to follow a man, a border patrol officer or other immigration official (it was unclear whether he was

Mexican or American), who claimed that he had to give her a shot. However, instead of receiving any kind of immunization she was brought into a bathroom where the official demanded that she give him money to let her pass over into the U.S. When she told the official that she did not have enough money to pay, they refused to let her pass. She was also threatened to be raped and abused by the immigration officials or border patrol agents. Eventually another official helped her pass through the border to reconnect with the group she was crossing with.

Immigration laws and separation of families

A woman who works in the legal department of Centro Presente, Nadia, asserted that the top two reasons for which Latinos go to Centro Presente is 1) to get permits to work and 2) to obtain “peticiones familiares”: U.S. residents can request that a family member come to the U.S. with legal resident status. Several other women who I interviewed came to the U.S. through this type of a process whether it was initiated by a parent, spouse, or other relative. According to Nadia this process of legalization happens a lot with women who try to bring their family to the US. Through these statements one can tell that some principle concerns for Latino women (and of the Latino community in general) is providing for the family and uniting the family by requesting permission for a family member to immigrate legally.

A personal story that illustrates the issues of immigration laws and the separation of families is Elsie Lopez’s story. Elsie’s mother came to the U.S. by request of her husband who had legal residency, but was still in the process of getting her citizenship when they got divorced forcing her to go back to El Salvador taking four-year old Elsie with her. After she returned to El Salvador, Elsie lost



touch with her father and has not communicated with him since. As she was reflecting on what she and her mother went through she said that she questions why her father did not try harder to keep the family together. She said the interview made her realize the kind of suffering that her mother probably went through.

Now Elsie is 23 and is experiencing a different kind of family separation. Elsie has dual El Salvador and US citizenship because she was born in Houston, Texas while her parents were still together. However, her daughter only has Salvadoran citizenship so when Elsie decided to return to the U.S. to pursue a better life for her daughter, she was not able to bring the child. Currently, Elsie is in the process of requesting legal residency for her daughter who is being cared for by Elsie's mother.

This process is complex and expensive, especially for someone who has limited English proficiency. Elsie explained that she is communicating with several lawyers and the U.S. embassy in El Salvador to try to figure out how to get citizenship for her daughter.

“Here there is a lawyer and he told me that I had to apply for normal residency. I have to buy the application from immigration that costs me \$185.00 plus the payment for the lawyer which is \$400 to \$600 and I have to buy two money orders that I really don't know what they are for, that I think one will cost me \$115 and the other \$85, more or less like that. I have to wait 6 months for the process. The other option is that I spoke with the American embassy in El Salvador and they gave me the option that I can arrange her citizenship in the embassy in El Salvador. As always I still have to buy the application which is \$185, but because I am a citizen I can go to the embassy in El Salvador, present myself and proof of citizenship and basically get her an American passport because she is the daughter of a citizen.

Obtaining legal residency is expensive, as one can tell by the many fees and application costs. Additionally the process is complicated, in some cases according to Elsie it is not even clear what she is paying for. Her daughter is in the process of waiting for an American passport, but Elsie has to go to El Salvador to present herself in order to receive the passport. She is planning to do this next March. Elsie said that she thinks the effects of immigration laws on family are sad when it separates children from their parents. She said that children learn to love those who take care of them, and can lose

touch with absent parents that may still be caring for them indirectly- through economic support.

Dependency and immigration status

Another issue that immigrant women face is dependency on others for their legalization process and economic support. This unfortunately leaves immigrant women more vulnerable in situations of domestic abuse. In many cases, as discussed previously, women are requested to come to the U.S. with legal status as a resident by a spouse who is a current U.S. resident. Their legalization process is then “sponsored” by their spouse. Sometimes these women come to the U.S. without documents and then wait to receive their legal status while living in the country with their spouse.

Many times these women are of lower socioeconomic status and have limited English proficiency. Those factors combined with their immigration status make it difficult for them to get a well paying job in which they might be able to achieve some level of economic independence. The risk for these women is that they are dependent on their spouse for legal immigration status and for economic support, and with dependency comes the risk of abuse. Immigrant women are less likely to report cases of abuse for fears of losing their sponsorship and they are less likely seek access to legalization without the sponsorship of a legal spouse. (Jonas, Susanne. "Reflections on the great immigration battle of 2006 and the future of the Americas") Mayra, along with other women I have interviewed, spoke about cases in which a woman crosses the border and is mistreated by her husband, but doesn't have an exit to remove herself from the dangerous situation because her immigration status is tied up in the abusive relationship

Nadia confirmed that while Centro Presente does not offer services specifically for women, the legal department does help legally orientate women who have been abused, or women who have residence but are in the process of separating from their spouse and need legal assistance in order to not lose their residency..

Immigration legislation

One could attribute part of this issue to the passing of anti-immigration policies over the past decade. Anti-immigration policies obviously affect the entire immigrant community adversely but even gender-neutral policies can have disproportionate effects on more vulnerable populations such as women and children. Immigration policies can make it more difficult for women to obtain social services and health care for themselves and their children. Additionally, stricter immigration policies make women less likely to report domestic abuse and seek alternative legalization processes. Several anti-immigrant and anti-immigration laws have been passed in recent years:

- ❖ The 2005 House of Representatives Bill H.R. 4437 passed in the House of Representatives and currently is under consideration by the Senate, if passed this bill would criminalize being an undocumented immigrant resulting in detention or deportation.
- ❖ The 2001 USA Patriot Act which initially was criticized for overt racial profiling of Arab Americans and South Asian Americans has also had harsh effects on the Latino immigrant population, punishing undocumented immigrants and non-citizens alike and treating them as “terrorists”
- ❖ Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) stripped immigrants and asylum seekers of many basic legal rights (including due process rights), facilitated, and stepped up proceedings for exclusion and deportation by eliminating the right of appeal and judicial review of decisions made by one Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent. In addition, it significantly expanded the list of crimes defined as "aggravated felonies" that made legal permanent residents and undocumented immigrants deportable, increased the difficulty of asylum procedures, and stipulated new grounds for exclusion and deportation ("removal").
- ❖ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, commonly known as the Welfare Reform Act) of 1996 denied public services and benefits to all noncitizens, i.e., to long-term Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs)--those who had entered with visas, or who had been able to adjust their status--as well as to undocumented immigrants.

(Information on immigration legislation taken from: Jonas, Susanne. "Reflections on the great immigration battle of 2006 and the future of the Americas"

Role of community organizations

Verbal abuse, intimidation, and violence against women and all people who are trying to cross over into the U.S. without documents is a huge issue that deserves serious attention at this time. Additionally, there are many issues that immigrants face after they have crossed the border such as lack of support, family separation, and legal problems. Fortunately, there are several organizations in Somerville and the greater Boston area that are dedicated to helping undocumented immigrants once they reach the US. Many of the women I interviewed cited community organizations as becoming a central part of their life once they reached the U.S. Rosa Maria has committed herself to solidarity with the community she works with through CORES.

"Sus problemas son mis problemas, porque yo lo siento como que somos parte una grande familia, y nosotros vamos a estar con ustedes hasta el final. Porque nosotros no los vamos a dejar, vamos a luchar siempre para todos ustedes... y vamos a seguir adelante."

(Translated from Spanish)

"Your problems are my problems [referring to undocumented immigrants in Somerville] because I feel like we are part of a great family, and we are going to be with you until the end. Because we are not going to leave you behind, we will always fight with you... and we will continue moving forward." (Interview Aguilar/ Hayes 2006)

Community organization and activism

Many Latina immigrant women in Somerville are deeply involved in community organization and sociopolitical activism. This is apparent in the overwhelming majority of female staff at Centro Presente, or in Rosa Maria's dedication to immigrant rights and community based action through CORES, or Consuelo's activism through the Somerville Family Network and participation on the Somerville Public Schools Parents Council; the

list could go on and on. Everywhere you look, women are becoming more and more empowered and involved in the community. A point that was brought up by several of the women in interviews was whether or not there were ties between women's traditional role in their home keeping the family together and their participation in community organizations. I have interpreted this as one way in which political engagement and community activism could be gendered.

The research of Carol Hardy-Fanta on Latina women in Boston politics draws attention to the great contribution that Latinas have made to Latino political participation. However, sometimes female participation can go unnoticed because it is largely grassroots, community-based work, versus top-down civic engagement. Hardy-Fanta asserts that "Latina women activists base their community activism on an inter-personal level and channelize their political thoughts to develop the latent consciousness of the Latina community of Boston regarding their daily and socio-economical life style." (Hardy-Fanta, Carol. "Discovering Latina women in Boston politics.") Hardy-Fanta has also identified that women are more likely to be directly involved in the community in a long-term sustainable manner in comparison to Latino men, who are more likely to leave an organization. "Politicized Latinas seek to raise the consciousness of the community; politicized Latinos respond to opportunity." (Hardy-Fanta)

A high level community engagement and intense dedication to their cause was a salient characteristic that came through with many of the women I interviewed. Here are several stories that illustrate Somerville Latinas participating in community organization and activism.

Centro Presente: Union, Poder, Justicia!

One of the community organizers at Centro Presente, Beatrice Senior, explained to me that one of the objectives of the community organization is to create leaders in the Latino community. She felt that because women are leaders within their own families, it was natural for women to become the great leaders of the community. Beatrice pointed out that most of the staff of Centro Presente are women, and sees one of the missions of Centro Presente as working to continuously empower women. In addition to having a

large amount of female staff, the current executive director of the organization, Maria Elena Letona, serves as a great role model for the other women working there. Zuleika, who is yet another female leader at Centro Presente, said that she respects the way Maria Elena connects with people. She [Maria Elena] is the head of an organization but refers to herself not as the director but as a “miembro” or member, and emphasizes that



“todos somos miembros.” [We are all members.]

What they at Centro Presente are fighting for “is that Latina woman can assume a new role in the community to improve their situation.” (Senor/ Hayes 2006)

Rosa Maria Aguilar and immigrant rights activism

Rosa Maria is in her core a political activist. This comes through in her feelings about both Latino immigrants (specifically the population served by CORES, mostly undocumented immigrants) and women. Her role in community based activism has for the most part revolved around issues facing immigrants, not specifically related to women. However, it is apparent that the struggles of undocumented immigrants are exasperated by gender discrimination, as seen in her story about crossing the border in Tijuana and the harassment and abuse she suffered.

Rosa Maria’s interview illustrated that similar to her feelings about Latino immigrants and the importance of working for self-improvement. She feels it is important for women to work to make themselves more independent and continue learning for their own benefit and that of their children. Rosa Maria told a story about a woman that came to CORES. She came with her four children and she told Rosa that she had to wait for a ride from her husband who was off drinking with his friends. He would tell her that he

was coming to pick her up, but he wouldn't and he would leave her there. Rosa asked her why she didn't learn how to drive, and the woman responded "Pero, porque?" [But why?]

And Rosa Maria responded:

Porque, nosotras las mujeres no tenemos que solamente ser... como inmobilizadas... Nosotras tenemos que superarnos (Aguilar/Hayes 2006)

(Translated from Spanish)

"Because we the women do not have to be restrained, we have to improve ourselves."

Rosa Maria told this woman that she had to learn for her children who will also suffer if she does not become more independent. The next year when Rosa saw the woman again, she showed her that she had gotten her license.

Another theme that came through in Rosa's interview was the importance of being strong for her children. There is a definite parallel between the role she plays as a leader in her community- being strong for her people and her cause, and the role she plays in the home- being strong for her family. Rosa Maria confided in me that in fact she also does not like to drive, but she learned how to for her children. Because of this, now she feels more liberated. She asserted that women should not just stay in the house making food, like they are taught in her home country. Here she sees new opportunities for Latina women.

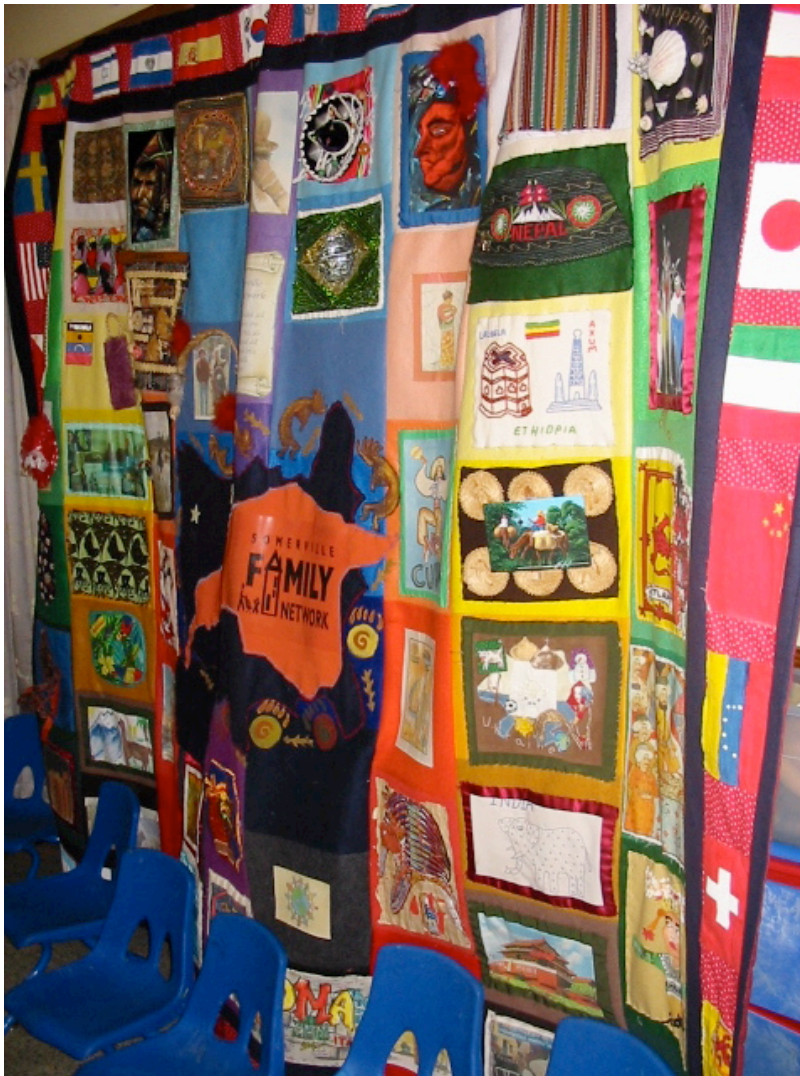
Quilting families together

Consuelo guides me into the classroom of the Somerville Family Network (SFN) smiling and waving to every woman we pass. A group of young women standing in a circle with their children begin singing the first verse of the "Hokey Pokey". The SFN is a community organization that seeks to support parents and children of immigrant families. "This is a good song for helping your children learn left from right," says Charlotte, the English teacher leading the song. The mothers are standing with their pre-

school age children, many of them look Latina, Black, or Arab by appearance. The room is an amalgamation of skin colors and accents, it is a living, and at that moment singing tribute to the continued immigrant presence in Somerville.

Consuelo points me towards a large quilt hanging on the left-hand wall. “Here,” she says guiding her hands across the fabric, “are all the flags, and the map of Somerville and the United States in the middle.” The quilt features flags and images of the many nations that represent Somerville’s immigrant community. I see the colors of Venezuela, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Brazil, and Haiti, a beautiful fabric tribute to diversity.

Consuelo Perez is one of Somerville Latino community’s dedicated activists.



Wife and mother of two daughters, her involvement in her children’s lives has translated into active participation and leadership within the Somerville Family Network and the Parent’s Council for her daughter’s UNIDOS program. UNIDOS is a two way bilingual language and cultural immersion program based out of East Somerville Community School. However, Consuelo’s activism goes beyond her commitment to her children’s education and responsibilities as a parent. She is an advocate for the entire Latino

community of Somerville and sees herself as an accessible resource to other Latinos.

I represent the Latino community. They look at me and I was always advocate, I was always in the middle. With the teachers, if the parents had a problem with the teachers or [they were] not communicating, I used to go with them. (Perez/ Hayes 20060)

Consuelo's involvement with the SFN grew out of her own need for support while raising her daughter as a single mother. While she was pregnant, her husband was working in Japan and without the traditional support of her family, most of whom were still in Japan, she turned to the community organization for support. For Consuelo, become involved with SFN for her personal needs lead to her future participation and leadership.

When I had Gizela I was by myself. Steve was still in Japan and I had to stay here so I was like a single mother. For my whole pregnancy I was mostly by myself. He used to come every month, every two months, or every three months. But anyway I did it myself my whole pregnancy, and when I had Gizela my whole family was already dissolved. It was not the same nucleus that we had before. So I had to take care of my daughter by myself, not the family support that we used to have in our country. I found the Somerville Family Network, and there I took advantage of the programs that they give to the parents and the kids. I got very involved with my daughter, and also in the program. They gave me the opportunity and I went to the Parents' Council where I did my newsletter. I remember, me and another woman, another Latino woman- we started doing our newsletter and we called it *Arroz con leche*.

I had not been working and think I wanted to be helpful. So I started getting more and more involved with my daughter at school. I used to advocate for the school because they were going to close the program. So I was there, advocating for the program and talking to the superintendent, anything that was happening in the school I was there. But in the meantime I think, it was because I was very involved that my English was getting better, people started looking at me like- asking me for help- anything... translation, any questions. I was like a resource for questions, whatever you name it! "Where do I go for food stamps?" "Where is the WIC?" Any questions- I used to know where to find it.

However, female activists and especially minority women activists face a great deal of resistance and discrimination. As Consuelo became more and more involved, she found that people would question her involvement and her voice was not always taken seriously for her race and gender.

The white community looks at me like, “Who is this woman? What does she want? Why is she being... why is she here?” I think that one of the things that I realized is that I was invited to the Parents’ Council because they needed representation; it was mandatory for me to be a representation. I was the puppet there [and] they used me. I didn’t know that... I didn’t know that [at the time]. (Perez/ Hayes 2006)

As seen from these testimonies, Latina women are challenging their traditional gender roles and becoming activists. One can also tell that women participate in politics and social activism in different ways than their male counterparts. Women organize their community and encourage activism through “interpersonal politics- a politics that blends personal relationships into political relationships by weaving politics into the fabric of daily life.” (Hadry-Fanta) This difference in participation dose not mean that women are not as dedicated. It was obvious from our conversations that civic engagement and community organization are a huge part of these women’s lives, consuming much of their personal time. Latina immigrant women in Somerville, whether they are fighting for immigrant worker rights or for equality in education for their children women, are taking action in their community and giving it a more human touch.

Race, gender, and socioeconomic class

Culture

During the interviews women were asked some questions relating to identity such as: What does being a woman mean to you? Many women had very different responses to this question. To some their identity had to do with a blending of cultures, for some their identity revolved around working, for others it was tied to the home. The following selections are put together to show how race, socioeconomic class, and immigration status have shaped immigrant women’s experiences and identity.

Zuleika Andrade: dark skinned Latina, born in Puerto Rico, raised in New Hampshire, says she loves Puerto Rican food and snowboarding. Her story is interesting

in the way she has navigated her dual identity as American and Puerto Rican. Additionally it is interesting how being a Latina woman from an upper class family has affected how others perceive her and how she perceives herself.

Zuleika believes that many Latina women deal with issues of identity. Drawing from her personal experience she has found herself fighting between two cultures. In college peers told her, “*no puedes ser Puerto Ricana porque... por ejemplo andas en corduroys,*” (“You can’t be Puerto Rican because... for example you wear corduroys.”) inferring that there was a correct way to be Puerto Rican and she were missing the right characteristics. It is apparent that Latina women are expected to act, talk, or dress in a certain way. Zuleika said that now reflecting on her experiences she would describe it as acculturation or a blending of two unique cultures to create a new one. Her story illustrates the interplay and affects of race, class, and culture on identity within the Latino community.

Citizenship and divisions within the community

Zuleika also asserted that sometimes these differences are exploited and used to divide the community. She continued saying that there are many borders to cross within one community, in some cases it is gender, other times it is nationality or race. Zuleika though that in some cases the government uses divisions in the community to prevent Latinos from uniting. An example she gave was that Puerto Ricans are citizens; they can work and vote (once they are living in the U.S.) just like any other Americans. She believes that “*Esto crea los conflictos y los choques entre las mismas culturas, y nos hace mas dificil luchar juntos para la justicia.*” Or “This creates the conflicts between the same cultures and it makes it more difficult for us to fight together for justice.” (Andrade/Hayes 2006)

Socioeconomic class

Nadia, a light skinned Venezuelan who also comes from a more affluent background and works at Centro Presente, reflected on immigrant women's experiences in the context of their socioeconomic class. Based on what she has seen working at Centro Presente, Nadia commented that in Latino homes responsibilities such as providing for the family and keeping the family together are attributed to women. These responsibilities are exasperated by poverty and status as an "illegal." She concluded that for this reason within the same community women of the working class have very different experiences than women occupying the upper class. Even though women of all classes may be experiencing discrimination based on their gender women of different classes will be affected in different ways.

Mayra's story is yet another perspective related to socioeconomic status. From our first conversation I could tell that working was an essential part of Mayra's life. She identified this trait as something she thought many immigrants had in common. At the beginning of the interview she commented in a straightforward manner, "*Primero, aqui directamente, lo que se ve es que ellos vienen a trabajar, solo a trabajar.*" (Translated from Spanish) First here, really what one sees is that they [Latino immigrants] come to work, they only come to work." (Valladares /Hayes 2006).

Mayra is working in order to offer economic support to her children who are still in El Salvador (where she was born and grew up). Her priorities in life are working to send money home and learning English to continue improving her personal situation and that of her children as well. It is apparent that Mayra is aware of the link between upward mobility and learning English in the US. *Estoy aqui por algo, quiero aprender y seguir adelante,* (Translated in Spanish) I am here for something, I want to learn and continue moving forward, she told me in reference to why she wanted to learn English. Her dedication to working, learning, and sending money back to El Salvador is a testimony to

her socioeconomic situation both in the U.S. and the needs of her children in El Salvador.



[Students at an English class at CORES]

Mayra also offered some interesting insights into how she viewed the differences between men and women of the same socioeconomic class. She stated clearly, when I asked what was the difference between the roles of men and women, *el hombre, ahora es y manana no es* “the man now he is and tomorrow he is not”. She explained that the role of a woman in the home is more permanent while men sometimes come and go. For this reason she believes that women suffer more. She repeated this phrase, about the suffering of women, almost like the chorus of a song.

Nosotras sufrimos, nosotras las mujeres sufrimos, nosotras vivimos sufridas...

(Translated from Spanish)

“We suffer, we the women suffer, we are living suffering.”

In summary of the major themes expressed in Mayra’s interview I think the most salient idea came through in the discussion about working. She demonstrated how as a woman living thousands of miles from her children her purpose in life was to work for them, and her concerns revolved around pushing herself forward, through work or studying. Additionally Mayra’s interview brought up some issues confronting working class women, women who have left their family in their country of origin, and women who are currently undocumented or are waiting for their papers. It seems that the lack of a support system for women is a reoccurring theme between interviews and the need for a space where women and share their experiences find common ground and learn from other women’s stories.

It is apparent from the stories I have heard that as a minority woman you face not only discrimination based on your race additionally you must confront sexism within a male dominated society. It is as if these Latina women are confronting a double barrier in society, one based on their race and another their sex. This gender-based oppression even finds its way into the home where Latina women are confined to traditional gender roles that make it difficult for them to “sigue adelante” or continue empowering themselves. For this reason it is even more impressive that these women are taking steps to empower themselves through involvement with community organizations. Women are leaving their traditional gender roles and finding support and empowerment within their community.

Raising our daughters



I asked Rosa Maria during our interview what the quinceañera signified in the lives of her daughters? For Rosa this celebration of the 15th birthday represent the child becoming a *senorita* and achieving maturity. A week later during an interview with a different woman she mentioned to me sometimes she found herself wondering how she should be raising her daughters. These two conversations, one about girls becoming women and the other about raising daughters, caused me to think about the idea of the next generation of women and ask the question: What kind on women will our daughters become?

Rosa Maria leans towards me and says in a soft voice as if offering advice to a child, she tells her daughters: it is more important that you take care of yourself through education and pursuing a career than having a man.

Zuleika said that in the future she would like to create a group for women to come together and simply talk to one another. Women in the community carry a lot inside themselves. Their problems, worries, and stresses can suffocate the women. Zuleika believes that it has to do with the fact that women feel like they have to remain strong, and almost stoic, for their children, husbands and work. This pressure causes them to “drown themselves.” She expressed that many times at Centro Presente women come to the office to attend a program but they end up venting their frustrations and worries, or as Zuleika described it “un-drowning themselves” (*desahogandose*). These women come to

talk to someone. She would like to create a group just to share the experiences of women so that they can help each other deal with the stresses of their lives.

[Ellas] vienen para una cosa o programa, pero termina solo desahogandose, quieren hablar con alquin.

(Translated from Spanish)

“They [the women] come for a program or something else, but they end up “un-drowning” themselves, they want to talk with someone.”

Consuelo, a mother of two girls, reflected on the future of her family and what it meant for her to be raising two young women. Her insights about raising daughters had more to do with preserving her their culture and language. She commented on what she perceived as cultural differences between Latina and American women and how they are treated by society according to these perceptions.

And I think we are very different perceived from woman to woman- its always the competition. I'm white, I'm more beautiful, I'm skinny, I am better than you... and from the point of the man... it's: American women are too tough, they don't take bull shit, they don't take any shit, but the Latino woman they can take it, they can abuse. I think all American men the have the same values and they look at us different. Maybe because they are insecure (laughs). I don't know. And that's very tough because I don't know to raise my daughters. I see a lot of American woman being very tough and never getting married, and I see a lot of Latino women who are not [tough], who are like me and they have nice marriages but at the same time they are being seen as the slaves, as the nice and humble woman. I don't know, I don't think the society learns to look at us with respect, that men and woman are equal or woman: white or black or whatever- we are equal. That's the biggest problem I am having, how to raise my daughters right now. If I teach them to be tough how hard it is going to be for them to find a nice... match, somebody who is going respect them. But if I teach them to be weak, the other is going to abuse. It is very difficult. But I have some friends who have- professional, Latino, woman, you know- very strong- the have the toughest time even with our own culture trying to find men.

Suggestions for future research

Due to the time constraints of a university semester schedule I feel that there are still many aspects of my research that remain untouched or need to be expanded. If I could offer suggestions for future research it would be:

- ❖ Finding stories of women from a larger variety of sources
- ❖ Attend more community events
- ❖ Seek out female narrators who have connection to running a business
- ❖ Always be sure to ask the narrators how participating in the project affected them
- ❖ Interview younger women

Conclusions

It is evident from the stories I have heard that in many ways Latina women are competing against all odds. These women face racial and gender based discrimination of a white and male dominant culture. However there is much optimism to be had. The women who I interview showed me that they are in fact “siguiendo adelante” or moving forward. They are finding support through community organizations, they are uniting their families and preserving their culture for their children, and they are involved in community- based activism. The activism of these women illustrates how their traditional role as the one who unites the family has been adopted and used to unite and empower their entire community.

More importantly these women despite the obstacles that many of them face on a day-to-day basis, are hopeful themselves and they see the value of their own stories. Elsie expressed these feelings to me when I asked her how she felt about the project:

“Me parece un excelente idea para que algunas personas pueden leer o escuchar y conscientizarse de que la mujer inmigrante vale, por cualquier

lados, sean si tengan papeles o no tengan papeles, y tratarla como igual no? igual de los demás

(Translated from Spanish)

“It seems to me an excellent idea, so that some people can read this or listen [to the stories] and become conscious of the fact that the woman immigrant has worth, whether or not she has ‘papers’¹ she is equal to the others and she should be treated as such.”

My hope is, if nothing more, is simply to provide a literary space for Latina immigrant women to share their stories, therefore producing a text that will allow others to have an insight into their unique experiences. I hope that readers are able to hear the voices of the narrators come through in the quotes and even in my own writing. In reality that is the real purpose of this endeavor: *making voices heard*. It has been a challenging and rewarding personal experience, one that has certainly changed me. I hope that it was a positive experience for all the women involved in realizing the project and in many ways this report is nothing more than a tribute to these women, to their strength, to their compassion, and of course to their stories.



¹ Many Latinos use the word “papeles,” literally “papers,” to mean being a legal resident of the U.S. and having ones documents.

Sources

1. Jonas, Susanne. "Reflections on the great immigration battle of 2006 and the future of the Americas. (Law overview)." *Social Justice* 33.1 (Spring 2006): 6(15). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale. Tufts Library. 18 Dec. 2006.
2. Torres, Andres. Latinos in New England. Temple University Press, Philadelphia PA, 2006
3. Hardy-Fanta, Carol. "Discovering Latina women in Boston Politics." *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* 11 (Annual 1998): 53(21). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale. Tufts Library. 19 Dec. 2006 .

Interviews

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Beatrice Senior. Rec. September 18, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Zuleika Andrade. Rec. September 26, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Nadia Pineda. Rec. October 1, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Mayra Valladares Rec. October 27, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Rosa Maria Aguilar Rec. October 28, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Consuelo Perez. Rec. November 26, 2006. Audiotape

Hayes, Rebecca. Interview with Elsie Lopez. Rec. December 17, 2006. Audiotape