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University of Nevada, Reno

***La New Mujer: How Economic Factors Redefine Gender Roles for Latina  
Immigrants***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and the Honors Program

by

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We recommend that the thesis  
prepared under our supervision by

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## **Abstract**

This study posits that Latina immigrants who participate in the U.S. workforce are empowered to redefine traditional gender roles as they gain economic autonomy. The scholar focuses on how gender roles are changing with greater economic gains in two specific spheres: the home and the workplace. The first part of this study elaborates on the state of Latina immigrants in the United States by drawing on the theory of Latina identity and the varied experiences of Latina immigrants. The second part focuses on family dynamics. Through the use of case studies, the scholar shows the diverse family experiences of Latina immigrants, from traditional nuclear families to transnational motherhood. The study then focuses on the disparities Latina immigrants face in the workspace. The following part examines how Latina immigrants are empowered to readjust gender roles in the home sphere and in the workspace due to economic gains. To conclude, the author offers suggestions for future research and ideas for creating public policy necessary to meet the needs of this group. More than half of Latina immigrants in the United States are employed. Moreover, in the current recession, women are keeping their jobs at a greater rate than men are. The economic and political prosperity of the United States will heavily depend on the standard of living and opportunities afforded to Latina immigrants.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project is dedicated to the most influential person in my life, my mother Bertha Rios. Mom, your sacrifices do not go unnoticed and you inspire me every day to be the strong woman you raised me to be. I love you.

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### **Introduction: Latinas in the United States**

Bertha left her rural ranch, perched in the mountains of a poverty-stricken town in the heart of Mexico, soon after turning sixteen. Her new husband, who was eleven years her senior, promised her they would live the American dream together right across the border. Bertha's head spun as she thought of all of the opportunities she would have in the United States. On the isolated ranch she called home, Bertha's life revolved around her household obligations, from baking tortillas to helping her mother care for her five siblings. Her father refused to let her have any type of social interaction and he forced her to drop out of school in sixth grade because he believed women should be confined to the domestic sphere.

In America, Bertha was certain her life would be different. She told herself that the first thing she would do when she arrived in the United States would be to put on a pair of jeans, something her father never allowed her to do because he believed that dresses were the only proper attire for "decent" women to wear. Once on American soil, Bertha found herself under the strict rules of her new husband, while enduring a land, culture and language completely unfamiliar to her. Although Bertha's husband promised her they would not have children until at least a couple of years into their marriage, he consistently impregnated her against her will. Bertha was restricted to maintaining the household and raising their small children on her own.

As soon as her children became somewhat self-sufficient, Bertha went against her husband's orders and found a job. Because her husband wanted to deter her from working, he took the family vehicle daily to ensure she had no access to transportation. Nevertheless, Bertha was determined to provide a better life for herself and for her

children. Five days a week, she walked forty minutes both ways to get to work. Often Bertha would have to trek through inches of snow or put up with sweltering heat in order to make it to work. Her tenacity paid off when after a few months of being on the job, she was promoted to a supervisor position. Soon after, she enrolled in classes to learn English. Meanwhile, she still found time to run a household and raise four young children. Finally, after eleven years of suffering abuse and torment under her husband, Bertha strapped on her jeans and divorced him.

Besides raising me and inspiring me throughout my life, my mother Bertha is the inspiration for this research project. Her story is not so unique in the sense that many Latina immigrants move to the United States thirsting for opportunities. These women often escape their native countries where economic hindrances and gender barriers intertwine to relegate them to second-class citizenship. All too often, Latina immigrants find that limitations to social upward mobility are as much a reality in the United States as in many parts of Latin America. Nonetheless, as my mother demonstrates every day, opportunity via economic gains in the United States empower Latina immigrants to break with traditional gender norms and command their own lives.

In this study, I show how, and to what extent, traditional gender roles are being reconfigured in the Latino community as a result of women having greater economic influence. I posit that Latina immigrants in the U.S. workforce are empowered in a way that allows them to redefine gender roles as they gain economic autonomy. Moreover, shifting gender norms are even more prominent in the current recession. From December of 2007 to the present more women than men are remaining or entering the workforce. Consequently, Latinos in the United States are seeing traditional gender roles in the home

and in the workplace change as women earn their own income and gain a different social perspective. This is especially pertinent considering that Latina immigrants are unlike other women in that they face more socioeconomic barriers to prosperity in the United States. In order to grasp some of the socioeconomic implications associated with working Latinas, I use recorded, first-hand accounts from Latina immigrants as my primary sources. Moreover, to contextualize the state of Latina immigrants in the United States, I use a combination of research related to gender theory, Chicana/Latina studies and immigration to demonstrate the societal disparities Latina immigrants face. I also use Gloria Anzaldúa's theory on Chicana identity, as delineated in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, to examine Latinas in America today.

In her book, Anzaldúa traces the history of the *mestiza*/Chicana, a woman of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood, from Mexico's conquest by the Spanish to the U.S. conquest by the Anglos. Anzaldúa articulates, through a series of poems and essays, how the conquests, mingled with traditional Mexican gender roles, have impacted the self-esteem of Chicanas. She argues that borders, both physical and social ones, have given way to a *mestiza* identity crisis where Mexican traditions mix with Anglo ones (101).

Anzaldúa points out how the dominant Anglo culture continually oppresses Chicanas because of their ethnic background, while Latino men oppress Chicanas because of their gender (102). Moreover, Anzaldúa argues that Chicanas are placed in a Malinche/Virgin Mary dichotomy where they are confined to two strict categories of identity: whore or a virgin (50). She describes further social expectations placed on Chicanas by Latino men: marrying a man, having children, cooking and cleaning for one's family and remaining passive, among other characteristics (39).

In light of the oppression of *mestizas*, Anzaldúa lays down a fundamental and groundbreaking theoretical framework, which paved the way for a new wave of feminism precisely for empowering *mestizas*. The new *mestiza*, Anzaldúa argues, is a woman of self-confidence who is proud of her heritage and asserts her identity (109). This study will rely on Anzaldúa's idea of *mestiza* consciousness in order to show how Latinas are empowered by gaining autonomy, especially financial independence, from men and social constraints.

In Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends, several scholars who conduct research—like Pierette Hondagne-Sotelo, Ernestine Avila and Cecilia Menjivar—on Latina immigrants suggest that gender roles change with greater economic gains in the United States. Nevertheless, transnational motherhood is examined as well to determine whether or not women who leave their children in their home countries are empowered by being able to financially support their families. I will use the research and case studies in this work to elaborate on empowerment in the home and workspace.

I will also examine Latina immigrant lives as represented in the documentaries *Made in L.A.* (2007) and *Maid in America* (2004). Both documentaries showcase women who exemplify empowerment in the home and workspace because of economic autonomy. For instance, *Made in L.A.* follows the lives of Latina immigrants who are embattled in an economic struggle; it tracks the workers who labor in a Los Angeles garment sweatshop as they attempt to gain basic labor protections. Over the course of three years, the women noticeably garner more respect for themselves as they realize their economic power.

Similarly, *Maid in America*, based on the book of the same title, follows three

Latina immigrants in Los Angeles who earn their income through domestic labor. Out of the thousands of domestic workers in Los Angeles, a significant portion of them are Latina immigrants. Unfortunately, their vulnerable social status often subjects them to labor in hostile environments. Although the women work in decent conditions, they question whether or not the money they are earning in the United States is worth setting aside their own personal goals.

For example, one of the women, Judith, has not seen her four young daughters since leaving them in Guatemala a few years back. Although she earns just enough money to support them, the emotional toll on her life and on the lives of her daughters has been enormous. She wonders if the economic gains are worth the cost of not being able to personally raise her daughters. Overall, the abovementioned case studies present the complexity of Latina immigrant lives as they become increasingly more pertinent in the socioeconomic structure of America.

Undoubtedly, Latina/o immigrants are changing the landscape of the United States. The U.S. Census reports that Latinos comprised half the population growth in the U.S. between 2000 and 2004. The U.S. population currently stands at about 300 million, and according to the census, about 45 million, or 15% of the population, is Latino. The census numbers point to the fact that Latinos are not only the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S., but also the largest in terms of population size (U.S. Census).

Before moving forward with the analysis of Latina immigrants in the domestic sphere and workplace, I must clarify how I will be using a number of terms. For one, the definition of “Latina” that I use will be that which the U.S. Census Bureau uses to describe a “Hispanic” or “Latino” person. National Council of La Raza notes that the

U.S. Census uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably to refer to people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Spanish, and Central American or South American origin. The term “Latina” applies to women from those regional groups, including those from other Spanish-speaking origins, regardless of race or immigration status (NCLR). In this study, I will use the following terms interchangeably: Latina, Hispanic, *mestiza*, Chicana.

Also, I must emphasize that the term “immigrant” does not automatically imply “undocumented.” Those who fall under the “immigrant” umbrella include U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, refugees, asylees, and those who are in the process of naturalization or adjusting their current immigration status (NCLR). For the purpose of this research, “immigrant” refers to a foreign-born person, regardless of legal immigration status, who is residing in the United States.

Moreover, my research spotlights Latina immigrants who belong to traditional nuclear families, as well as women who are single and not engaged in a lifestyle associated with a traditional family unit. In addition, “traditional gender roles” refers to social gender norms of Latin America that will be specifically described later. Also, “economic factors” entails capital of monetary value, including money itself and/or physical property. Finally, the term “empowerment” is used to describe cases in which Latina immigrants have redefined traditional gender roles in two different spheres: the home and the workplace.

The results of this study are intended to advance research related to Latina immigrants in a variety of disciplines: economics, political science, gender studies, immigration studies and Latina/o studies. The Latino community is plagued with a

multitude of issues, from limited access to education to a variety of health-related concerns, all of which impede upward mobility. Latina immigrants have an added barrier: strict traditional gender roles. However, here I will underscore how Latina immigrants are changing gender perceptions and how comprehensive public policy can eradicate barriers to economic prosperity. Ultimately, I formulate an argument reflecting how Latina immigrants are the future of the economic and political livelihood of the United States. I argue that public policy must recognize the Latina immigrant condition in order to grant them greater socioeconomic opportunities.

## Chapter 1: Latina Immigrants in the Family

Latino families are becoming increasingly diverse both in Latin America and in the United States. Economic factors are heavily influencing family structures as families seek upward social mobility via increased income. In 2009, the U.S. Census noted that out of all Hispanic couples in the United States, 37.2% never married while only 45% of couples who did marry sustained relationships in which both partners were present in family life. Although many Latinas still belong to traditional, nuclear families, many are experiencing transnational motherhood or life as a working mother. At the same time, more Latinas than ever before are opting to have families later in life in order to take advantage of economic opportunities in the United States.

What are the expectations placed on the women of the household in those traditional family structures in which both partners are present? How do family dynamics and gender roles change when mothers enter the workforce? To answer these questions and further discuss the role of Latinas in various family structures, the lives of three Latina immigrants will be examined in this chapter: María and Maura, both garment workers, and Judith, a domestic worker. Before focusing on their lives, it is essential to contextualize the social experiences of Latinas in today's society.

Gloria Anzaldúa has provided an array of work concerning the social condition of *mestizas*/Chicanas in the United States. She primarily writes from her own experiences and cultural history. Anzaldúa makes two significant points in Borderlands/La Frontera: La New Mestiza: Chicanas are oppressed by Chicanos because of their gender and oppressed by the dominant Anglo/male culture due to their race and gender.

Anzaldúa argues that gender discrimination existed in the pre-Columbian era,

before white male society imposed itself on the native people of North and Central America. For instance, the popular image on the Mexican flag stems from a legend of the indigenous people. Anzaldúa describes how the legend within itself illustrates the cultural oppression of native women, who are the ancestors of many Mexican women:

*Huitzilopochtli*, the God of War, guided them to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine. The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the ‘higher’ masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America (27)

This passage points to the notion that indigenous women were already oppressed in their communities before the Spanish conquest.

Similarly, Anzaldúa writes that white society has oppressed the *mestizo* race for generations now. *Mestizos* are the descendents of the indigenous people of the Americas and the Europeans who later settled in what is today Latin America. Most of the Mexican and Central American population are comprised of *mestizo* blood. Anzaldúa claims: “Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. The dichotomy is the root of all violence” (59). By stereotyping indigenous people as sub-human and “primitive,” whites have consistently devalued *mestizos* (59). Anzaldúa elaborates of the consequences devaluation has played

in the lives of Latinas: “Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the *india* and the *mestiza*” (59).

Moreover, *mestizas* must confront the reality that although their indigenous and Spanish ancestors occupied what is now U.S. territory first, the dominant white culture in the U.S. treats Chicanas like second-class citizens and foreigners on land that has historically belonged to their people for centuries. After the conquest, language barriers were established and Anzaldúa argues that such barriers here also deteriorated the self-esteem of *mestizas*. Today, the dominant culture continues to encourage *mestizas* to speak English over Spanish, signifying a devaluation of the Spanish language which comprises an integral part of Chicana identity (Anzaldúa 77).

Anzaldúa argues that Mexican women are especially self-conscious because of specific cultural dualities. She explains, “Within us and with *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the White culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance” (100). It is evident that Chicanas are caught up in two strong identity dilemmas, one due to gender and the other due to race, that continue the pattern of oppression. Anzaldúa describes how the complexity of how this dichotomy impacts *mestizas* in the following way: “In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders” (101).

In addition, Anzaldúa argues that Chicanas are often forced to strictly fit the mold of one of two contradicting roles: La Malinche or La Virgen (53). Mexican culture is

saturated with stories and images of both women. La Malinche is a historical figure whose legacy resides in Mexican myths that have distorted the events of her life.

Historically, La Malinche was a Mayan woman named Malintzin. As a child, Malintzin was sold by her noble family into slavery and eventually ended up in the hands of the Spaniards. From that point forward, she was obligated to serve as translator and mistress to Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who defeated the Aztecs. Despite her unfortunate predicament, in Mexico's history books, she is noted as the one responsible for the downfall of the Aztec empire to the Spanish conquistadores.

La Malinche is considered a traitor and a whore in popular Mexican culture. This characterization stands in stark contrast to La Virgen, the virgin Mother of God whose image pervades Christianity. La Virgen is a virgin saint in popular Mexican culture. Culturally, Latinas fall under one category depending on whether or not she meets certain expectations. Anzaldúa elaborates on the implications of cultural expectations on Chicanas: "Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (38).

Anzaldúa provides examples of what is deemed to be unacceptable behavior for women. She explains that Chicano culture dictates that women must not do the following: disobey their husbands (if they do, they should be beaten), visit or gossip with neighbors, or expect their husbands to help rear the children and help with the housework. Finally, women should not strive to fulfill a role other than that of a housewife (Anzaldúa 49). Women who do not marry or have children are considered bad women who are incapable of properly fulfilling their gender roles (Anzaldúa 40).

Women who fail in meeting their prescribed social roles are placed under the same category as La Malinche.

On the other hand, women who remain virgins until marriage, while showing signs of humility and selflessness, are put in the same category as La Virgen. Anzaldúa argues that Chicano culture praises these women and deems them to be good women. Anzaldúa notes that the contradictions continue as Chicano culture claims to protect women but yet confines them to rigid roles (39). For example, Chicanas are told from a young age to not trust any men, even those in her own family. Yet, at the same time, she is asked to obey all men she comes across (Anzaldúa 40). It becomes apparent that the expectations placed on *mestizas* leaves them vulnerable as opposed to secure.

Essentially, Anzaldúa argues that respect in Chicano culture is not a two-way street: “*Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for *la abuela, papá, el patrón*, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants” (40). Indeed, there are many contradictions in the lives of Chicanas. Anzaldúa highlights her arguments when she recalls how as a child, she was told by her mother that “well-bred girls don’t answer back” and that it is disrespectful to “talk back to one’s mother or father” (75).

In much the same manner, Anzaldúa claims that she was not encouraged to question things or vocally express herself. She writes of the words used to describe the women who did not confirm to the aforementioned expectations: “In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I’ve never heard them applied to men” (75). Anzaldúa’s experiences as a young girl are characteristic of how young

*mestizas* are raised to believe their voices do not or should not matter.

Anzaldúa writes that the dualities described above comprise the *Coatlicue State*. *Coatlicue* is the mother goddess of the Aztecs who gave birth to *Huitzilopochtli*. In order for Chicanas to conquer the hindering dualities previously discussed, they first need to acknowledge the *Coatlicue State* in which these dualities merge. For Anzaldúa, the goddess represents not only duality, but contradictions: “*Coatlicue* depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (69). A Chicana who is conscious of her state, can take action steps toward empowerment.

It is probable that the implications of the aforementioned contradictions on the psyche of Latinas lead to identity issues and low self-esteem. However, many Latina immigrants do realize that patriarchal society hinders their opportunities. As a result, Latina immigrants in the United States may not always enforce the same cultural norms upon their daughters in the household. For instance, it has been noted of Mexican immigrant women in the United States that

As they educate their daughters regarding sexuality, mothers actively challenge the dynamics of gender and sexual oppression that they were exposed to as heterosexual women within family and couple relationships. For them motherhood is an opportunity to resolve some of their unfinished issues as women. And for them, the issue of *protection* and sexual oppression is central to the sex education of their daughters (González-

López (217)

It is evident that social experiences in the United States may at times enable Latinas to stray from the traditional gender norms that permeate Latino culture.

A greater understanding of the various roles Latina immigrants play in the family can be accomplished by examining the dynamics in Latino families in which the mother holds down a job. The lives of the women who are examined in this chapter represent the various family structures prevalent in today's society. Working Latina immigrants are often engaged in domestic relationships with a male partner. However, with increased globalization, and consequently greater economic opportunities, transnational motherhood is becoming more commonplace for Latina immigrants with children.

The first woman who will be examined is María. The documentary *Made in L.A.* follows María and two other Latina immigrants as they organize their communities to garner labor protections from the sweatshop-like conditions in which they work. María left Mexico with her husband when she was just a teenager. Three children and 23 years later, María is suffering under the abusive hand of her husband. Nonetheless, she is determined to fight for labor rights and works with a community center to rectify brutal conditions at the garment factory in which she works.

The beginning of the documentary depicts María as she struggles in the workforce. A regular work week for María consisted of twelve-hour shifts in the factory, followed by several hours of sewing at home, six days a week. Meanwhile, her children rarely saw either parent as María's husband was frequently absent from home. María explains that her husband would usually come home on weekends, after he'd already spent his entire paycheck on personal expenses. Therefore, María's meager, hard-earned

income went toward maintaining the household. She was responsible for allocating funds efficiently within the home, as well as fully responsible for all domestic work.

Moreover, when her husband was home, he restricted her activities and attempted to confine her to a traditional, submissive role in the household. María recalls that at one point, her husband made her quit attending meetings at the community center because he feared the organization was conspiring to turn her against him. It is evident that María's husband was reluctant to see her gain any sort of economic autonomy or personal self-worth.

María's case exemplifies the struggle many Latinas face as they attempt to balance greater economic opportunity with family life. Latina immigrants are finding that traditional gender roles are changing as more women are deciding what purchases to make for the household. At the same time, these women may struggle with household chores and other responsibilities on top of their paying jobs. For instance, in Allison Linn's article "Rising Number of Women Earn More Than Mates," a working Latina explains the difficulty of trying to balance dual roles. The working mother in the article is named Jessica. She explains that she finds it difficult to fulfill the traditional role of a mother as well that of the primary breadwinner because she must scantily spread her time, energy and resources (Linn).

Therefore, although women have more say in their household in terms of purchasing power, they may not be empowered because of the extra responsibilities that tie them down to the household. In many cases, when male partners are present in the home, they do not make an extra effort to help with domestic work that is traditionally considered women's work. In her article, Linn cites a poll that found that both men and

women are uncomfortable with the idea of women being primary breadwinners.

According to the poll results, both genders would like to continue traditional roles, where the male partner is the primary breadwinner (Linn).

Although some may feel that traditional roles should be maintained, Latina immigrants are overwhelmingly participating in non-traditional, transnational roles in the family. Transnational motherhood is becoming more prevalent as more women leave their homes in Latin America in search of economic opportunity. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila study Latina immigrants and transnational mother in Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends. The scholars define transnational motherhood in the following way: “Latina immigrant women who work and reside in the United States while their children remain in their countries of origin constitute one variation in the organizational arrangements, meanings, and priorities of motherhood” (317). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila observe that patterns of transnational motherhood have increased since the early 1980s, when thousands of women from Central America left for the United States to find jobs. More recently, Mexican women have done the same. When immigrant women leave their native countries, their children are often left in the care of grandparents, fathers, other relatives or close friends. Due to immigration status and lack of funds, transnational motherhood usually causes families to being separated for several years, sometimes up to a decade (Avila, et al. 317).

For instance, the same documentary also highlights Maura. Maura joins María and other members of the community to fight for basic labor protections. Maura finds herself in the midst of fighting for basic worker’s rights as result of her struggles to provide for the children she had to leave in the care of her parents in El Salvador. Every

now and then Maura watches a home video that her family sent her years ago, when her children were still toddlers and her father was still alive. She cries as she recalls the heartache of leaving her family behind.

It is evident that Maura's family in El Salvador also feels a void in their lives. As a matter of fact, the documentary depicts Maura's three sons as young men attempting to illegally cross the U.S.-Mexican border to join their mother. After days of wondering about the whereabouts of her sons, Maura learns that they were detained in Mexico and deported to El Salvador. It is apparent that increased economic gains have come at a significant cost to Maura; the emotional toll of being separated from her family is great.

Similarly, the documentary *Maid in America* depicts the struggles Judith encounters in transnational motherhood. As a young mother, Judith leaves Guatemala to be with her husband in the United States and find domestic work in Los Angeles. She leaves her four young daughters in the care of her sister. Over the course of a few years, Judith is able to consistently make enough money to send back home to support her daughters. While living and working in the United States, she and her husband unexpectedly have a fifth child.

Soon after her last child is born, Judith decides to take her infant son and return to her daughters in Guatemala. Although she expected her family to greet her warmly upon her return, only her three oldest daughters and elderly mother are excited for the reunion. Her youngest daughter, who is now a young child but was just a baby when Judith left, refuses to acknowledge Judith as her mother. The child will not even allow Judith to hug her. Moreover, Judith's sister is upset because she has developed an emotional bond with her four nieces and sees them as her own daughters. She is devastated at the thought of

having to relinquish her role as their mother. Judith's oldest daughters express that they would rather have their mother at home any day over the economic capital the family was able to accumulate due to Judith's hard work.

As is evident from these texts and case studies, Latina immigrants are socialized to believe they must fulfill certain roles in the household or in family life. Those roles often relegate them to second-class citizenship. Moreover, when they fail at meeting the contradictory expectations placed on them by patriarchal cultures, they often suffer a diminished sense of self-worth or lack of self-esteem. The case studies present some of the barriers Latina immigrants and their families confront with greater economic gains in patriarchal cultures.

In order for Latina immigrants to overcome various forms of oppression, they must pass through Anazhdúa's *Coatlicue State*. Increased economic autonomy can be seen as one way to accomplish this since it opens Latina immigrants to new experiences and leads them to realize their economic worth. Thus, economic gains can lead to opportunities for upward social mobility. In the next chapter, I will focus on workplace disparities and present more case studies to show how accumulating economic capital is essential to empowerment for Latina immigrants.

## Chapter 2: Latina Immigrants in the Workplace

The Center for American Progress reports that minorities have been the hardest hit in the current recession. In January 2009, the unemployment rate for Hispanics hit 9.7%, the highest level of unemployment for Hispanics since 1995 (Logan). The number of unemployed Latino workers has increased by 57.1% between December 2007 and January 2009, which amounts to an estimated 2.1 million people. The average weekly earnings of Latino workers in the fourth quarter of 2008 were \$535 (in 2008 dollars). This amounts to \$207.20 less than median weekly earnings for white workers during the same period (Logan).

The disparities compared to white women do not end there. In 2007, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) released a report on Latinos in the workforce. The report asserts that Latinos are more likely than white or black workers to be killed or injured on the job. In 2007, 937 Latinos were killed due to a work-related injury. The majority of the victims were immigrants. The death toll for Latinos on the job has remained the highest among all other groups for more than 15 years (NCLR).

In addition, NCLR notes that two in five Latino workers do not earn sufficient wages to keep their families out of poverty. According to NCLR, 41.8% of Latino workers earned poverty-level wages, about \$10.20 per hour, to support a family of four in 2007. By comparison, only 21.9% of white workers and 34% of black workers earned poverty-level wages that same year. Moreover, merely 52.3% of employed Latinos had health insurance through their employers in 2007, while 72.6% of white workers and 67.1% of black workers had coverage.

NCLR also reports that only 34.6% of Latinos had access to retirement plans

through their employers in 2007. NCLR asserts that current laws are not working for working Latinos (NCLR). These statistics illustrate the degree to which Latina immigrants encounter disparities in the workplace. It is vital to note this information in order to understand how Latina immigrants must cope at the bottom of a rigid economic power structure.

With respect to the way gender dynamics are being reconfigured during the current recession in the United States, Allison Linn, “Rising Number of Women Earn More Than Their Mates,” argues that gender perceptions are changing in a recession where women are keeping their jobs while many men are not (Linn). In September, the unemployment rate for adult men stood at 10.3%, in comparison to 7.8% for women. Because full-time female workers of all ethnic backgrounds are still making 77 cents for every dollar their male counterparts make, men are losing their jobs at a faster rate than women are in the current recession. As a matter of fact, nearly 75% of the approximately 7 million workers who have lost jobs have been men (Linn).

As counterintuitive as it may sound, more women in the workforce does not amount to more women holding positions of power in the workforce. Women are still not obtaining as many leadership roles as their male co-workers, nor are they garnering as many employee benefits as them. As a matter of fact, it’s been noted that only 77% of female primary earners have access to personal health insurance through their jobs, while 91% of male breadwinners have access to healthcare (Linn). The implications that stem from lack of benefits can be a major detriment to Latina heads of households.

In her working paper entitled “The Current Economic and Financial Crisis: A Gender Perspective,” Rania Antonopoulos identifies how the economic recession has

negatively impacted low-income women. Antonopoulos argues that strides made in poverty reduction and gender equality have been set back in this economy.

Antonopoulos asserts that because low-skilled jobs saturated by a female workforce are being retained in the downtrodden economy, the women working these jobs are becoming increasingly uninformed and underpaid.

On the subject of poverty, a digest article by Les Picker published in The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) reveals that out of all Latino groups in the workforce, one is particularly worse-off in terms of wages earned: Mexicans. Picker notes that people of Mexican origin, regardless of immigration status and education, earn less income than all other Latino workers. Furthermore, Mexican immigrants are the lowest paid of all immigrant groups while native-born Americans of Mexican ancestry earn less than other Americans in the workforce (Picker).

This article makes an important observation beyond ethnicity, instead focusing on nationality. As noted above, women are grossly underpaid in comparison to men, and Latinos and immigrants suffer the most disparities in the U.S. workforce. Additionally, the study by NBER asserts that people of Mexican origin suffer greater disparities still in comparison to other Latino groups (Picker). Therefore, one can conclude that Mexican immigrant women are the most disadvantaged group in the workforce.

Nonetheless, Latina immigrants are making capital gains at a time when many in the American workforce are losing economic security. This trend is particularly evident in the Latino community. Latina immigrants dominate more recession-proof industries, like domestic work, while Latino men tend to work in areas which are not so stable, like construction. As a result, Latina immigrants are keeping their jobs in the service sector,

which was noted earlier as being a highly unregulated sector, while men are losing their jobs elsewhere. In households where both spouses work, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 25.9 percent of wives were earning more than their husbands at the start of the recession in 2007 (Linn).

This fact is especially pertinent considering that women in any nation are the key to economic growth since statistically, the greatest social returns stem from educating women (12). In The Quest for Economic Growth, Easterly claims society needs to invest in the success of women. Easterly explains that through comprehensive economic policy, women can become educated, productive members of the workforce. The economist notes that women who obtain higher skills are more likely to have children who are healthier and better-educated. In turn, the next generation is more likely to contribute to the economic prosperity of a nation (12). Easterly points out that in the richest countries of the world, women outnumber men because they tend to live longer. Easterly notes that according to the *World Human Rights Guide*, over four-fifths of the richest fifth of countries in the world have social and economic equality for women the majority of the time (12). In contrast, in poor countries, discrimination against women is prevalent and evident in education, nutrition, medical care and rates of violence (15). Easterly explains, “None of the poorest fifth of countries has social and economic equality for women” (12). This pattern of oppression leads one to believe that economic growth occurs when the poor in a given society are socially empowered. Easterly suggests that “Poverty is not just low GDP; it is dying babies, starving children, and oppression of women and the downtrodden” (15). Although women's rights are evidently not a priority in many developing countries, there is much work to be done in developed nations to continue

increasing the participation of women in the economic arena.

This notion rings truer for Latina immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, because often they are not afforded adequate labor protections. According to NCLR, employers often discriminate against Latina employees as they avoid garnering legal protections for their workers and continue to knowingly place them in unsafe working conditions with little pay. Because employers are rarely caught, penalties are often not incurred for illegal behavior so the pattern of oppression continues. NCLR reports that employers have come to treat compliance with labor laws as optional, rather than mandatory. In addition, those who are fined for illegal behavior often pay the penalty as “merely a cost of doing business” (NCLR).

It is evident that legal loopholes allow for employers to neglect the well-being of their workers. For instance, NCLR notes that in many Latino-heavy industries, it is common for employers to misclassify workers because an IRS code allows employers to misclassify workers as long as they can prove that the “mistake” is common in their industry. When employees are misclassified, they are robbed of work-related benefits like health care and retirement security. NCLR estimates that one-third of businesses with high Latino employment rates misclassify workers.

NCLR adds that another legal incentive for employers to continue oppressing Latina immigrants stems from the legislative level of the federal government. For example, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 further pushed the workplace power structure in favor of employers over employees. According to NCLR, the results of the legislation are as follows: “Unscrupulous employers who cut corners and threaten workers with deportation if they complain are granted an unfair advantage over

employers who follow the law” (NCLR). As a result, employers bring down workplace standards for all employees when they take advantage of vulnerable workers.

The U.S. federal government contributes to the workplace disparities faced by Latina immigrants through inaction as well. For one, NCLR reports that the Department of Labor does not function as efficiently as it should. It is noted that today, a full-time Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) employee has four times the caseload of an OSHA employee in 1975. Additionally, NCLR asserts that employers often discourage employee complaints and so underreporting is prevalent. Therefore, it can be difficult to allocate limited resources to the areas where there is the greatest need.

The federal government also fails to protect certain types of industries altogether. For instance, the domestic industry is saturated with a Latino workforce. NCLR highlights that 37.5% of the domestic workforce is comprised of Latinos. Most of the Latino domestic workforce is made of women since cultural gender ideologies restrict men to traditionally male jobs, like gardening, restaurant work and construction, and women to domestic jobs (Menjivar 108). As a matter of fact, the *Los Angeles Times* estimated that Southern California alone was home to more than 62,000 Latinas working as nannies in November 2005 ([i]NDEPENDENTLENS).

Latina immigrants in the domestic industry are often unprotected from employer abuses due to outdated labor laws. Although the United States has shifted toward a more service-based economy since the 1970s, the laws have failed to adjust with the times. Employers find it easier to fill domestic jobs with undocumented women since it is difficult for the federal government to regulate this sector since the job is the realm of the

employer's personal home (Menjivar 108). Little enforcement in the service industry leads to less than optimal working conditions, low pay and no benefits for working Latinas (NCLR).

Although it has been noted that low pay is prevalent among Latina immigrant workers, the depth of the wage disparity and the reason why the disparity exists needs to be further explored. Marcella Socorro Carrillo Hemmeter highlights the wage gap between Hispanic and white women in her study Hispanic-White Women's Wage Differentials. Hemmeter explains that although Latinas tend to be less-skilled than their white counterparts, geographic location and age discrimination contributes to wage disparity as well. Nonetheless, Hemmeter found that between a Latina and white woman of similar age and geographical location, the Latina will be paid less for doing the same job. In fact, Hemmeter found that in 2000, Hispanic women earned about eleven percent less than non-Hispanic white women (135). She argues that Hispanic women earn less than their white counterparts due to low levels of human capital. The marriage market theory in economics demonstrates that married women, for whatever reason, are usually more skilled than single women are (Hemmeter 136). Therefore, married women are valued more in the labor market and as a result, they earn higher wages. About half of Latinas in the workforce are married. However, a greater number of white non-Hispanic working women are married in comparison to Hispanic working women (Hemmeter 135).

Economic theory points to the fact that on average Hispanic women do have lower levels of human capital available to them in comparison to white women. Human

capital is a valuable tool that one can use to garner more bargaining power in the work sphere and obtain greater economic opportunities. However, as previously noted, a significant number of working Latinas do not have partners who contribute to household income. In addition, Hispanic working women who are married may not always be as educated as white working women. It is apparent that Latina immigrants do not have access to as much human capital as white non-Hispanic women.

In her working paper “The Current Economic and Financial Crisis: A Gender Perspective,” Rania Antonopoulos asserts that disadvantaged groups of women, like Latina immigrants, are losing even more bargaining power in an economy that is moving toward industrialization and globalization. This trend especially hurts low-income women and promotes more poverty level-wages (1). Antonopoulos argues that although the global economy is more productive than in previous decades, labor is greatly underused in comparison to the past (7). She claims that the global economy is becoming more industry-intensive rather than agriculture-intensive (2). Antonopoulos elaborates: “As demand for textile and agricultural exports decline, along with tourism, job losses are expected to rise in these female-intensive industries. In addition, the gendered nature of the world of work suggests that women will see an increase in their share among informal and vulnerable workers worldwide, and will supply more of their labor under unpaid conditions” (2). As previously mentioned, Latina immigrants dominate the domestic industry and already face many workplace disparities in that realm. The recession will result in lower wages and less authority in the workplace for Latina immigrants.

Antonopoulos argues that the current economy is especially dangerous because it

reinforces societal power structures, while reaffirming existing inequities. Just as social progress and women's rights were making significant headway in terms of contributing to economic development, Antonopoulos posits that globalization and the recession have halted progress. Those with power will make the decisions and may ultimately lead to the “accentuation of existing disparities and hardening of social exclusion with grave social, economic and political repercussions” (3). Latina immigrants in the United States, like other vulnerable groups across the globe, are becoming increasingly underpaid and undervalued in the recession.

Workplace disparities influence family dynamics in a variety of ways. Sometimes, more opportunities in a family structure arise from Latina immigrants holding greater economic influence but other times constraints become more apparent. For instance, women who are employed carry more economic influence in their households. They are able to make more of the purchasing decisions. It is quite frequent for “men's authority” to be reduced as a “consequence of the women's increased economic contributions” (Menjivar 109). However, these women must also work longer hours than men because they are paid less for doing the same work and receive fewer benefits (Menjivar 109).

The workplace disparities discussed above are exemplified in Linn’s article on working women in the recession. In her report, Linn describes how Jessica, who works as a mental health therapist and had to pick up extra shifts after her husband was laid off due to the recession. Unlike her husband, Jessica does not receive benefits at work so she must work longer hours to make up the loss. She says she worries about what might happen if the family's current health care plan is subsidized and the monthly payments

are increased. Jessica also indicated that she worries that the family is facing long-term financial instability because she is the sole provider of her family (Linn).

For Jessica, increased time at work means decreased time at home with her family. Because she works as a child therapist, most of her appointments are in the afternoons or evenings. On busy days, she may not see her own children. Furthermore, she also finds it difficult to fulfill domestic responsibilities at home, like cooking for her family. Jessica also has less personal time to take care of herself and do things she once enjoyed, like exercise. Jessica describes her lifestyle prior to the strike of the recession: “I used to have a really nice balance in my life. Now, the balance is all askew” (Linn). Nevertheless, Jessica is more privileged than other working Latinas because she is educated and comes from a middle-class background. Furthermore, her husband is willing to help her around the house, while he looks for another job.

Latina immigrants who live in poverty have fewer resources at their disposal to help negotiate more rights at work or to better run a household. Additionally, unlike Jessica, many Latina immigrants adhere to strict cultural norms, such as those described previously. Consequently, they may have husbands who are not willing to lighten their workloads or they may not be willing to allow their husbands to help, so as not to be deemed as failing in what they perceive to be their responsibilities as women.

When Latina immigrants become the sole financial providers of a household, they often take care of the household responsibilities as well (Menjivar 116). In Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends, Cecilia Menjivar noted of Latina immigrants in California: “In these situations, entry to paid work in the United States reaffirms gender relations—either ideologically or practically—and both the men and the women become

active agents in this process. In a way, this serves to assure the men, conceivably threatened by the women's improved economic opportunities, that they still hold authority” (Menjivar 117). As a result, Latina immigrants will work twice as hard to fulfill their actual or perceived gender roles at home.

It is also emphasized that men feel threatened by not being able to fulfill their roles as breadwinners: “These men often respond by diminishing their own responsibilities, thereby creating greater burdens—physically and financially—for the women at home” (Menjivar 120). In extreme, but not uncommon, situations, men may turn to alcohol, when they become frustrated for not being able to fulfill what they perceive to be their gender role at home. In these cases, Latina immigrants are more likely to become victims of domestic violence (Menjivar 109). However, it should be stressed that ultimately workplace disparities put women in vulnerable situations. The social construction of employment, which keeps Latina immigrants in low-paying, unprotected jobs, is the root of gender relations at home as well.

Among Latina immigrants, domestic workers are confronted with special circumstances with respect to their employment. Domestic workers usually work in solitary environments as either nannies, caregivers for the elderly, cleaning ladies or in other domestic roles. As a consequence, these women are frequently isolated from their social group, including other Latina immigrants. Moreover, in their domestic roles, Latina immigrants become first-hand witnesses to American, middle- to upper- class living arrangements.

The way in which Latina immigrants perceive traditional gender roles often changes when minimal peer influence is coupled with a greater understanding of

American lifestyles (Menjivar 118). Nevertheless, the socialized work roles of immigrant men, who are often employed in fields like construction and restaurants, often lead to a reaffirmation of gender roles since they are surrounded with like-minded peers (Menjivar 119). Consequently, domestic workers may aspire to achieve middle-class status so as to lead lifestyles similar to their employers (Menjivar 119). However, a new perception of gender relations doesn't necessarily entail that Latina immigrants would like to work as much as their female employers do. On the contrary, many Latina immigrants would like to accumulate more economic capital only so they can afford to stay home and fulfill their household obligations and family responsibilities (Menjivar 119). Ideally, these Latina immigrants would like to continue the pattern of patriarchal family roles (Menjivar 120). Unfortunately, the poverty in which these women live will most likely not allow the dreams of these women to materialize (Menjivar 121). As mentioned, unlike Jessica, a vast amount of Latina immigrants live day to day with limited resources, opportunities and social clout. Therefore, social mobility is less accessible or nearly impossible.

Some of these Latina immigrant lives were featured in *Maid in America*. Eva's life presents another case study for this project because she is a domestic worker who aspires to achieve middle-class status, an aspiration that is her own version of the American Dream. In her native country, Mexico, Eva was a licensed accountant. Due to her immigration status in the United States, Eva can't work in her trade. She resigns to cleaning homes until she can afford to become a licensed accountant in America. After long hours of back-breaking labor, Eva goes home to study for her accounting exams.

Eva must deal with the added burden of having little financial resources. Even though she is a single woman, Eva struggles financially. Domestic work soon becomes a

cyclical, rather than a temporary, lifestyle for Eva. She finds that she needs the financial support from her cleaning jobs to survive today and save for her future tomorrow. The domestic industry, Eva learns, provides little room for upward social mobility. Yet, Eva can't help but dream of what her life would be like if she lived the type of lifestyle similar to those for whom she cleans.

Similarly, like the women in Chapter 1, Lupe is one of the garment workers featured in *Made in L.A.* Lupe left Mexico City at the age of seventeen to escape her oppressive situation at home. After losing her mother at a young age, Lupe's father and brothers kept her in what she called servant-like conditions. Lupe was not able to complete her studies because she was obligated to cook, clean and fulfill other domestic responsibilities for the males in her family.

In the United States, Lupe thought she would gain more opportunities for upward social mobility. After beginning her work in the garment industry, Lupe quickly learns that as an undocumented Latina immigrant, she faces various hindrances to her dream. Lupe is overworked and underpaid, working in sweatshop-like conditions with no benefits. Despite standard workplace conditions, through increased economic capital Latina immigrants like Lupe begin the process of empowerment and start to redefine traditional gender roles. In the next chapter, I will examine how Latina immigrants are empowered by economic gains despite workplace disparities.

### Ch. 3: Latina Immigrants and Empowerment

According to Gloria Anzaldúa's theory concerning Chicana identity, the first step to empowerment is realization. One must realize her oppression in order to overcome it. Anzaldúa describes this stage as the *Coatlicue State*, where the dualities concerning race and gender merge. A *mestiza* copes with her societal oppression and imposed expectations by developing this "tolerance for contradictions" (101). Next, the *Coatlicue State* must be transcended. Anzaldúa writes: "The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (102). To transcend, a *mestiza* needs to acknowledge the historical context of her oppression, followed by a "conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions." After this is accomplished, she can reinterpret history and rewrite myths to reshape her identity (104).

Essentially, Chicanas need to unlearn the dichotomies that Latino culture has engrained in their psyche. Chicanas must assert that they are neither La Malinche nor La Virgen, neither a whore nor a virgin. Chicanas must embrace their brown, indigenous blood. Moreover, Chicanas should remain conscious of the patriarchal, Anglo culture that surrounds them so they can fight through the barriers and be heard. *Mestizas* must support each other to accomplish this daunting task. In other words, it is crucial that women join together and stand up for feminist values and against patriarchy (Anzaldúa 106).

Economic capital begins the process of empowerment as Latina immigrants realize their social value. Working Latinas are especially aware of their contributions in

the current recession. For instance, Jessica, the child therapist who was introduced in a previous chapter, relays the idea that she enjoys taking care of her family despite the added responsibilities. Jessica acknowledges that there are various challenges that come with being a working mother. For instance, she doesn't spend as much time with her children as she would like to. Nonetheless, she says she is empowered by being able to increase her income to provide for her family (Linn).

Many Latina immigrants share this view of empowerment as they are able to transform traditional gender roles through various ways. Like Jessica, many are empowered by being able to provide for their families, a role that has historically belonged to men. Additionally, Latina immigrants are empowered when economic autonomy leads to increased self-esteem and independence, two notions that have been denied to Latinas in the past. Therefore, work within itself is empowering for Latina immigrants since it allows Latina immigrants to earn their own income and gain a broader perspective on gender roles. Cecilia Menjivar notes: "The work women perform allows them to observe practices and behaviors beyond their immediate groups, which they may selectively incorporate in their own routines. Besides, women are typically more enthusiastic about embracing values that would enhance their position" (118).

Indeed, in Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends, Menjivar describes how one Latina immigrant from El Salvador recognizes how holding down a job in the United States improved her social status and self-esteem. The woman indicates that "Here, the man and woman, both have to work to be able to pay the rent, the food, the clothes, a lot of expenses. Probably that...makes us, the women, a little freer in the United States...the ones who work because maybe yes, in El Salvador I didn't feel as

secure as I feel here” (Menjívar 108). It is evident that security is linked to economic autonomy as women are able to provide for themselves and their families.

When Latina immigrants gain more economic capital through work, they become more independent as well. With their earned income, many women can decide how to allocate resources within their households. Often, Latina immigrants choose to spend their income on items that symbolize their ideal social situation of achieving middle-class status. For instance, Menjívar notes that one group of Latina immigrants would spend a portion of their wages on crystal for their homes. To these women, the crystal symbolized their advancement to a middle-class status (112). Whatever Latina immigrants choose to spend their income on is not as important as the mere fact that they have the ability to make that choice. Thus, economic autonomy also transfers to independence for many Latina immigrants.

Although Latina immigrants take pride in being able to provide for their families, they also gain greater independence as members of their families become less dependent on them. Menjívar asserts that research indicates that in some households in which Latina immigrants are the sole providers, men attempt to lessen the workload for their spouses. In Latin America, men in similar situations did not share in the domestic responsibilities. At times, shifting gender roles are by choice, while other times by necessity (Menjívar 108). For instance, one couple from El Salvador switched roles in the household after immigrating: “In the United States, they both work full-time, but their views have changed – perhaps due to the social perception of her work in El Salvador and the financial challenges in the United States of trying to sustain a family on one income” (Menjívar 115). When Latina immigrants receive spousal support, they are granted

greater independence and freedom from restrictive gender roles because women are able to break away from domestic responsibilities and are able to fulfill other roles (115).

Additionally, when Latina immigrants are the main providers in a household, greater economic capital allows them to give their children more opportunities to climb the social ladder than they themselves had. At times, the greatest accomplishment Latina immigrants obtain is the ability to use their economic capital toward the upward social mobility of their children. Many women choose to remain in the United States in order to continue building capital specifically for this purpose: “Some women see a definite advantage in remaining in the United States. They see the benefit as not so much improving their own social position in the household but as providing opportunities for their children” (Menjivar 120). Therefore, economic factors can empower Latina immigrants as their economic capital is passed down to later generations.

Empowerment through economic means is evident in the lives of the women who were analyzed in the previous two sections of this study: María, Maura, Judith, Eva and Lupe. It is apparent that the women transcend the *Coatlicue State* illustrated by Anzaldúa. When the women were first introduced in this study, they were each struggling in their homes and in the work sphere with the negative consequences of holding down a job. However, these same women were empowered in other aspects as a result of working. By acknowledging their oppression, the women were able to take active steps in improving the standard of living for themselves and their families.

María's transformation to an assertive woman provides a powerful example of how economic factors allow Latina immigrants to redefine cultural gender norms. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Made in L.A.* follows María's journey in the garment industry as

she tries to balance work with family. María marched on the streets, protested outside of shops, attended rallies, talked in front of hundreds of college students and even appeared on the radio. It is evident that after realizing her oppression, María was empowered to stand up for her rights and break from cultural gender norms. After dedicating several months to various initiatives for workplace justice, she is recognized by the community center as the most active labor rights fighter. As discussed in Chapter 1, patriarchal culture dictates that Latinas adhere to their domestic responsibilities and remain passive. However, María took an active role in her community and asserted her rights as a laborer.

More importantly, María asserted her rights as a human being. By the end of the film, María breaks the abusive relationship with her husband and boldly decides to raise her children on her own. Therefore, through her job, María was able to realize her oppression, but yet have enough resources to be financially independent of her husband. With her funds, she is able to make the purchasing decisions for her family. By fighting for her rights, she is also able to set a good example for her children and create opportunities for upward social mobility. In fact, María supports one of her sons who aspires to be a doctor, while she protects her daughter from growing up in a patriarchal household. Undeniably, María transcends the *Coatlicue State*, reforms gender roles in her home and gains self-esteem.

María's cohort, Maura, also gains self-esteem as she asserts her labor rights. Like María, Maura's job as a garment worker allows her to support her family in Guatemala. Maura, a transnational mother, is empowered by being able to financially provide for herself and her family. It is apparent that Maura is able to sustain her family solely on her income, without having to be dependent on a male partner. Similar to María, Maura

recognizes the grueling conditions in which she works are not justified and so she fights to garner more labor rights.

Maura recognizes she deserves better pay and better working conditions. Maura's re-established self-worth allows her to actively campaign for change. It is evident that she breaks from traditional gender roles by providing for her family and obtaining more opportunities for them via economic capital. Moreover, by asserting her labor rights, Maura contradicts a culture that has consistently ingrained in women the notion that they should not be seen nor heard, and that their only roles to fulfill are confined to the household.

The life of another transnational mother who fights to create more opportunities for her children was also examined in Chapter 1—Judith, the woman from Guatemala who works in the L.A. domestic industry. She and her husband leave their four daughters in Guatemala to seek more economic opportunities. Judith is tormented by leaving her daughters in her native country. At the same time, she is aware that economic capital allows her to support her children and improve their standard of living in Guatemala. It is evident that Judith's financial situation allows her to provide her family with more opportunities for social upward mobility. For instance, the family in Guatemala is able to add more commodities to their home with the extra income. The ability to use her economic capital for the purpose of providing for her family is empowering, as it would not be possible without financial capital.

Additionally, Judith is empowered by realizing her own worth. Like María and Maura, Judith also joins a labor movement to protect her rights as a worker. Judith becomes an active member of a labor cooperative for domestic workers. The cooperative

is comprised of Latina immigrants, all of whom are owners of the enterprise. As noted in Chapter 2, the domestic industry doesn't provide many labor protections for Latina immigrants. As such, the women of the cooperative combine their limited resources to ensure that they each have employee benefits, like health insurance and cell phones to connect with each other for business-related matters. Judith says that belonging to the cooperative reaffirms her power as a worker.

Although Judith returns to Guatemala with her children and so must rely on her husband for financial support, the independence she gained as a domestic worker contributed to her new sense of self-worth. This is evident by Judith insistence that she and her family return to the United States, indicating that she knows that she and her family deserve a higher standard of living than the one they are able to obtain in Guatemala's struggling economy.

Similarly, Eva, the Mexican immigrant in *Maid in America* who wants to be a licensed accountant in the United States, strives to obtain her American dream via economic advancement. Like Judith, Eva joins a local organization to fight for labor protections for domestic workers. Through the organization, Eva helps put on a play where she stars as *Superdoméstica*, a fictional heroine who rescues domestic workers from abusive situations. It is fitting that Eva would play this role seeing as how in her personal life, she does take power into her own hands. For example, other than joining a labor rights organization, Eva also strives to educate herself by learning English and earning an accounting license.

Eva works hard in hopes that it will pay off in the future. Cleaning homes is merely a means for her to obtain her ultimate economic objective—that of being an

accountant. Although she finds it challenging to study and work simultaneously, she recognizes that she needs her job to finance her ultimate dream. Again, it is evident that her job provides a venue for her to assert her rights. Whereas most Latinas are culturally oppressed from speaking out, Eva's position as a domestic worker ultimately empowers her to challenge traditional gender norms.

Similarly, Lupe provides a quintessential example of a Latina immigrant who is empowered by seeking to break away from restrictive gender roles. Lupe, featured in *Made in L.A.*, was the woman who left Mexico as a teenager in search of freedom. In Mexico, she said she felt like the servant in her household, meeting the domestic demands for the men in her family. As a garment worker, Lupe found that she continued to suffer under servant-like conditions. However, this time, she was empowered by learning about oppression and how to overcome it. Lupe begins to work with the community center to improve the situation for garment workers in L.A. As a matter of fact, Lupe even leaves her job in the garment industry and applies for a leadership position at the center.

Lupe blossoms in this role. The film depicts Lupe organizing the men and women in her community. She leads marches and demonstrations. Moreover, she is confident in her ideas and repeatedly articulates what she believes. Lupe advances despite her socioeconomic status. She travels all over the world to continue the fight for worker's rights. She reflects on her experiences and recalls how she once lived in complete ignorance of her oppressed condition, but knowledge empowers her to make a positive change in her life and improves her self-esteem. She clearly transcends the *Coatlicue State*.

It is apparent that the Latina immigrants mentioned above were empowered by economic gains. The women in the case studies were able to transcend traditional gender norms with greater economic capital. However, it is also important to note that many hindrances to social mobility also stem from workplace disparities. Ultimately, there is much work that can still be done to improve the lives of working Latinas. Public policy should reflect the needs of this important population.

### **Conclusion: Raising the Standard of Living for Latina Immigrants**

Undoubtedly, like the women whose lives were examined in the case studies, my mother's narrative would be much different had she been granted more opportunities throughout the course of her life. Fortunately, there is still occasion to rectify many of the injustices my mother and other Latina immigrants encounter as members of the workforce. Ultimately, U.S. society does have the ability to improve the standard of living for this group. From the way people are socialized, to the public policies that can be implemented, there is great opportunity to improve conditions for working Latina immigrants.

Restrictive gender expectations and the idea of racial inferiority should not be upheld in any populace. Specifically, the men and women of the Latino community need to destroy the various dichotomies which force Latina immigrants to play a singular role. For instance, a woman must no longer be confined to assume the role of either the passive virgin or an unbridled whore. The myths surrounding these dichotomies and others must be dismantled. Rather than continuing the tale of La Malinche as a whore and trader to the indigenous people of Mexico, it is essential to recognize that the actual historical figure was the victim of gender and racial oppression. Malinche was sold into slavery by her family because as a daughter, she was of no value. Similarly, the Spanish conquistadors took advantage of the indigenous woman because they did not value her as much as they valued Spanish women. Malinche's oppression is not unlike the oppression today's Latina immigrants undergo.

It is our responsibility to revise these myths in order to replace guilt with self-worth in the conscience of Latinas. The Latino community must work with the several

factions of the United States that make up our diverse society. Everyone has a role to fulfill in ensuring Latina empowerment. Anzaludúa emphasizes that the mainstream, Anglo, community in the United States needs to acknowledge that historically they have placed Chicanos in second-class citizenship, but improvements can be made in the relationship between Chicanos and Anglos (107). Similarly, Latinas must recognize their oppression in order to surpass the *Coatlicue State* and gain self-esteem. As a society, we must deliver a message of empowerment to Latina immigrants, assuring them that their lives are valued as they contribute greatly to our country's success.

In conjunction, public policy should be revamped to better accommodate Latina immigrants in the workforce. According to NCLR, the federal government needs to take a more active role in holding employers accountable, while enabling employees to defend themselves against workplace injustices. Primarily, employers who violate wage and safety standards must be severely penalized so that future employers are deterred from continuing the pattern of oppression. Moreover, emerging job markets that are saturated with low-skilled workers need to garner more recognition from the federal government. NCLR asserts that Congress needs to allocate more funds to the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division of OSHA. With more funding, the organization can develop programs to focus on industries immersed by low-skilled workers, who many times have limited English proficiency.

Additionally, NCLR notes that the Department of Labor needs to partner with community-based, nontraditional and nonunionized workers. Latina immigrants are underrepresented in traditional labor unions, but as noted in the case studies examined in this research project, Latina immigrants often participate in community-based labor

organizations. The federal government needs to take more active steps in working with these vital organizations to inform workers of their rights and provide culturally-competent, educative programs (NCLR). Moreover, NCLR suggests the creation of public policy to eliminate a “floor on wages and a ceiling on hours,” as that is the primary ingredient for labor exploitation (NCLR). Once this practice is halted, employers will no longer be able to underpay and overwork Latina immigrants. This problem is especially prevalent in nontraditional work environments, like in domestic work. As noted, Latina immigrants dominate the domestic industry and thus are not being afforded adequate labor protection. Public policy should address tax loopholes and unjust practices that saturate the domestic service industry, as well as other nontraditional work arrangements.

In the current recession, greater injustice and inequity is prevalent among the most disempowered members of the labor force. Primarily, unemployment rates, which have greatly increased in the Latino population, are to blame as workers in the most vulnerable, and often lowest-paid, industries are laid off. Therefore, income is minimized in already impoverished households. Additionally, in this recession, states are finding it more difficult to allocate precious resources to those who need it most. Public policy should include more fiscal stimulus packages to compensate for high unemployment rates and lack of public goods (Antonopoulos 10).

Finally, public policy needs to address the broken immigration system of the United States. According to NCLR, more than ten million American workers are undocumented. Moreover, 81% of the workers are from Latin America (NCLR). Current laws make legal immigration to the United States greatly difficult and sometimes impossible. As seen in the case studies, undocumented workers are often exploited by

employers because they will not assert their rights or are unaware of their legal rights in the workplace. Comprehensive immigration reform should include a path to legal citizenship for thousands of working Latina immigrants, thus raising the standard of living for all workers in a particular industry as they learn about their rights as laborers and as citizens.

The aforementioned public policy goals are only a few suggestions that can lead to a greater standard of living for Latina immigrants. However, more research needs to be done in the field of Latino studies, gender studies, political science and economic policy to adequately address all the needs of Latina immigrants. For instance, future research may center on Latina immigrants and education, language issues or their participation in unions.

As is evident, the complexity surrounding Latina immigrants is colossal. Situations are diverse and consequently, empowerment is defined by every woman in a different manner. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in this study, economic factors do empower Latina immigrants to break from traditional gender roles. Latina immigrants are essential to future economic growth in the United States. To truly invest in the future of this country, U.S. society must make the American dream an obtainable reality for Latina immigrants.

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