

Different Paths: Gender, Immigration and Political Participation

Michael Jones-Correa
Harvard University

Building on arguments made by Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), Hardy-Fanta (1993), and Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), among others, this article makes the case for a gendered understanding of immigrant political socialization. Looking at recent Latin American immigrants to New York City, the article argues that immigrant Latino men are more likely to favor continuity in patterns of socialization and organization, and immigrant Latinas are more likely to favor change. This finding helps bridge theoretical and empirical literatures in immigration studies, applying the logic of gender-differentiated decisionmaking to the area of immigrant political socialization and behavior.

One of the recurring questions in immigrant political socialization literature has been whether there is a break or continuity with previous patterns of socialization and political participation. Do immigrants orient their politics towards the home country? Do they continue familiar patterns of organization, or do they assimilate into the patterns of the receiving society? Immigration is unquestionably a disruptive experience for those involved. Immigrants have to deal with changes or ruptures in their identities, occupations, families and social networks. But the question of what happens with immigrant politics is not really a question of whether previous political socialization continues or whether the pattern breaks. The questions should really be: *When* do political socialization patterns continue, when do they change, and under what circumstances? Building on arguments made by Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), Hardy-Fanta (1993), and Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), among others, this article gives one answer to this question, making the case for a gendered understanding of immigrant political socialization.

Examining the political socialization and organization of recent Latin American immigrants to New York City, this article argues that immigrant Latino men are more likely to favor continuity in patterns of socialization and organization, and immigrant Latinas are more likely to favor change. Men undergo not only the disruption of the immigration experience, and with it the rupture of family and social networks, but also a relative loss of status as they negotiate entry into the economic sphere of the receiving country. Comparatively middle class and well educated in terms of their countries of

origin, Latin American immigrant men in Queens initially take jobs in the receiving country with status and class positions well below those they held before immigrating. The immigrant organizations they form and participate in compensate for the loss of status by providing a social sphere or arena where a migrant's previous status is recognized and bolstered. This is particularly true of those seeking organizational or leadership roles. Women, on the other hand, usually enter the labor market with less previous work experience, so although they may hold low-status jobs, they experience less downward mobilization in the job market and so suffer less status inconsistency – the difference between the occupational status they hold now and the social status they once had in their countries of origin. On the contrary, working for pay, women gain a greater say in the household, which gives them an increased incentive to stay in the United States. Through their children, women come into a much broader contact with a range of public institutions than do men. Since immigrant organizations generally deny leadership positions to women, women's contact with American governmental institutions provides them with an alternative route to mobilization. The structuring of social and economic experiences in the United States leads to very different kinds of organizational incentives for immigrant women and men.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The standard unit of analysis for the study of immigration flows has been either the individual or the household. However, scholars have increasingly rejected a purely individualistic analysis of immigrant decisionmaking to suggest that immigrants operate within social networks, of which the family is the most important. Immigration has increasingly been seen as satisfying the collective logic of the household, rather than that simply of atomized individuals. Still, since the mid-1980s there has been growing dissatisfaction as well with the unqualified household model. Scholars began pointing out that households are not internally undifferentiated; different members of the household may have distinct interests and concerns in mind even while joining together to make decisions about migration strategies. The work of Grasmuck and Pessar, culminating in their 1991 monograph on Dominican immigration to the United States, provided much of the foundational evidence for thinking, in particular, about gender-differentiated immigration strategies within the household. Other scholars have built on these findings, applying this gendered analysis to other immigrant groups in other contexts. Hondagneau-Sotelo's (1992, 1994) important contribution to the literature, for instance, uses this gender-differentiated approach to describe settlement strategies within Mexican undocumented immigrant households in California.

This gendered approach to immigration studies is potentially much more widely relevant than simply explaining differences in strategies of settlement and return; however, it remains to be applied in other areas. In this sense it has yet to live up to its full potential. One promising area of application revolves around issues of socialization and, specifically, political socialization. A number of authors have noted independently that immigrant women are more likely than immigrant men to take primary roles in community organization in the receiving country (Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Uni, 1991; Pardo, 1991; Naples, 1991) and that immigrant men and women have very different understandings of politics (Hardy-Fanta, 1993). However, while these authors' findings have been striking, there has been little attempt to explain why exactly men and women's political understandings and activities should differ. The goal of this article, then, is to bridge these two literatures, applying the logic of gender-differentiated decisionmaking to the area of immigrant political socialization and behavior. One immediate finding is that the differentiated social benefits men and women receive from membership in immigrant organizations, in conjunction with their gendered experiences after arrival in the United States, explain a great deal of the divergence in male and female political strategies.

DATA

This article focuses on the experience of contemporary Latin American immigrants to the borough of Queens in New York City. Since the reform of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, shifting entrance requirements from restrictive quotas favoring European immigrants to more even-handed national and regional ceilings favoring both skills and family reunification, legal immigration has risen from 282,000 people annually to more than 600,000 a year in the 1980s. Rates of immigration to New York City rose from 57,000 to 78,000 a year in the 1960s and 1970s, to 86,000 annually in the 1980s. About one in six of all new immigrants to the United States initially settle in the city. Much of the recent immigration to New York is Caribbean and Latin American. Forty percent of all Caribbean immigrants and 35 percent of all South American immigrants to the United States settle in the city's five boroughs. Sixty-one percent of all Dominican immigrants – the single largest immigrant group to New York since 1965 – establish themselves in the city.¹ More than a half million of these new Latino immigrants now reside in Queens, which has the most diverse Latin American population in the city.

¹New York City received 15% of all immigrants in 1980, down from 20% of all immigrants in 1940. Figures are from the INS annual immigrant file tapes, 1982–1989; unofficial figures including illegal immigration are significantly higher (Salvo and Ortiz, 1992:29).

This article is based on fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews carried out in the borough of Queens, New York City, over eighteen months in 1991-92 (*see* Jones-Correa, 1998). Participant observation at immigrant events and organizational meetings, as well as records of day-to-day activities in the neighborhoods of north-central Queens, resulted in a substantial body of fieldnotes. In addition to this informal data gathering, a set of more formal open-ended interviews were carried out among contacts made during the fieldwork period. During a twelve-month period, 112 semistructured open-ended interviews were completed, all with first generation documented immigrants age eighteen and older. Subjects for these interviews were drawn initially from public notices put out by community agencies and organizations active in the area, as well as lists of names drawn up by community groups or local government officials. Additional contacts were generated from initial interviews, in snowball fashion, while other contacts were established directly while residing in the area. This multiple-entry snowball method allowed access to a first generation immigrant population which is difficult to reach directly (Massey, 1985; Cornelius, 1982; Hendricks, 1980), while avoiding some of the danger of interviewing only certain strata or limited personal networks which is inherent in a traditional snowball approach.

This approach did not eliminate all biases in sample selection. The individuals in the interview sample were not "typical immigrants." Of the 95 taped interviews of first generation immigrants, 80 were with individuals who were members of political, professional, cultural or sports organizations.² The sample is therefore skewed towards those who are already active in some form of organizational life. The sample is also more heavily drawn from the Colombian and Ecuadorian first generation immigrant population than from other Latin American immigrant populations in Queens (these two groups contribute 62% of the sample, while making up only 40% of the first generation immigrant population in Queens). Finally, the sample is more male than the overall immigrant population (the sample is 63% male vs. 48% in the immigrant population overall). The potential for some distortion in describing first generation immigrant political life is mitigated by the complementary participant observation fieldwork, which was less organizationally centered, captured more of the experience of different national groups, and which highlighted women's rather than men's points of view. By combining structured open-ended interviews with participant observation, I was able to interact with people over a period of time and in a number of different contexts. These interviews and fieldnotes are the basis for the argument which follows.

²Another 17 interviews were completed with native-born Puerto Ricans and Anglo-Americans who were also involved in political or associational life, for a total of 112 interviews.

DOWNWARD MALE MOBILITY

General studies of immigrant earnings have consistently shown that immigrants usually experience a decline in income and occupational status after arriving in the United States. This is particularly true for Latin American immigrant men in Queens, who often immigrate to the United States with an education, training, and a set of skills which would place them within the middle class in their home countries. Chiswick's study of male immigrants entering the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s shows earnings at the time of entry being on average 15 percent below that of native-born men with the same demographic characteristics, and only gradually being made up over time. The schooling and pre-immigration labor market experience of migrants, he argued, are not easily transferable (Chiswick 1978, 1980). Other studies have confirmed that after substantial initial loss of occupational status, immigrants tend to be upwardly mobile. Douglas Gurak's 1981 survey, for instance, of 904 Colombian and Dominican first generation immigrant respondents in New York City found a significant amount of upward mobility for these immigrants from the first jobs they held in this country to those they held currently or held last. Immigrants' first jobs were often as unskilled industrial labor, but mobility out of this sector was relatively rapid (Gurak, 1988:43). With each succeeding job, migrants moved further away from manufacturing and into clerical/sales and, to a lesser extent, professional/management occupations (Gurak, 1988:19). Other researchers have been significantly less optimistic. Borjas' studies of immigration indicate that at time of entry (at age 20) men who migrated from 1975 to 1979 earned substantially less than native-born Americans (Borjas, 1990, 1989). He projected that over time the gap would narrow, but even after 40 years in the United States the wage differential would still persist. Moreover, Borjas is even more pessimistic about recent immigrants; he concludes that these "new waves of immigrants are unlikely to assimilate fully into the U.S. labor market during their lifetimes" (Borjas, 1990, 1995). Most analysts take this more pessimistic view – immigrants' occupational position declines upon arrival, and their earnings may never equal those of workers born in the United States.

Portes and Bach's study (1985) goes beyond an analysis of immigrant earnings to examine the decline in occupational status and diminished expectations experienced by male immigrants after their entry into the United States. They conducted three surveys of the same group of Mexican and Cuban immigrants from 1973 to 1979, tracking occupational mobility and attitudinal changes over time. Their results indicate that both groups suffered sig-

nificant initial downward mobility. While Mexicans at the lower end of the occupational scale were somewhat upwardly mobile in the U.S. labor market, at the other end of the occupational scale, however, there were steep declines in the proportion of those who were employed as white-collar and intermediate service workers (clerks, tailors, barbers, etc.). Cuban immigrants, who were more middle class than their Mexican counterparts (25% had been in white-collar occupations before leaving Cuba), experienced even greater downward mobility. After three years in the United States only 10 percent held white-collar jobs. Former white-collar workers, after immigrating to the United States, became semiskilled industrial workers (a category of jobs held by 8% in Cuba, but by 29% in this country), unskilled laborers (the percentage in this category rose from 5% to 10%), or skilled laborers (the percentage increased from 7% in Cuba to 13% in the United States). These figures are, Portes and Bach note, "a reflection of the downward shift in the entire group's occupational status" (1985:191).

There is no doubt that the initial downward mobility shared by most male immigrants is traumatic. In interviews in Queens, informants often related vivid stories of their first job experiences. For many middle-class immigrants from Latin America, arrival to the United States meant having to do manual labor for the first time in their lives. A man told me that in Colombia he had worked in the Central Bank, but had been laid off and came to the United States:

I came here to work. . . . Here there is work, if and when you look for it. A lot of people here don't work because they don't want to. But here you can find work, even if it's washing dishes. That's what I did. . . . The first place I worked was [in a factory] putting the legs onto ladders. I had never done manual work in my life. I had always worked in an office.

This downward mobility can be a discouraging experience. "Take the case of professionals," said the President of the Ateneo Ecuatoriano, himself a doctor, "They become completely disillusioned . . . they have to survive however they can, doing whatever they can." There are many professionals who end up driving cabs and washing dishes in restaurants, remarked the director of a Latin American social agency. This strikes hard, noted a Colombian, "in the general case of the professional . . . the educated person . . . a former bank employee for instance, who finds himself here with an ignorant person from Guatemala, cleaning floors together." This statement describes perfectly the powerful sense of dissonance aspiring middle-class immigrants often feel between their sense of status and their current position of employment. Perhaps as important as their initial downward mobility is the gap between

the jobs immigrants aspired to and those they ended up holding. For example, in Portes and Bach's (1985:196) study, Mexican and Cuban immigrants not only experienced a decline in their occupational status, but even when they regained their economic footing six years after arrival they still had neither reached the level of their original occupations in their home countries nor achieved their expectations for life in the United States.

MAINTAINING STATUS

However, the loss of occupational status may not be crucial to immigrants' sense of identity and definitions of success. Most Latin Americans who emigrate to the United States for economic reasons are often uncertain how long they will stay in this country. Many come as sojourners, with thoughts of going back after a few years. Asked why they came to this country, most male Latin American immigrants to New York City give some response about wanting to improve their economic situations. But the fruits of their efforts are not meant to be enjoyed in this country. As one Dominican man put it, "I just want to make enough [to live well], and then go back." In their home countries, many of these migrants are perched precariously on the edge of the middle class. As migrants, success comes from accumulating as much as possible in a limited time, and then returning with their savings to their country of origin. The income they earn here may be enough to bolster and secure their class status at home (Pessar, 1987:104; Bray, 1984). To accumulate as much as possible, as quickly as possible, means that immigrants take on work they would not normally consider in their home countries – employment as factory laborers, for instance. A Colombian woman pointed out that "A lot of people are satisfied, say, with looking for a job and earning good money; they say 'This is sufficient, because I'm not going to stay here long – I'm going back to Colombia.'" Because many immigrants' interest is in short-term accumulation, finding a job – any job – is more important than job security or benefits.

If short-term accumulation is the goal immigrants, particularly sojourners, seek, then immediate short-term downward mobility may not matter as much to them if they are earning enough to save for the return to their home country. Nonetheless, they may act to minimize status inconsistency in two ways. The first can be the decision to remain within an ethnic enclave or, in the absence of a full enclave, at least to stay within the labor market networks established by co-nationals or other Latinos. In these ethnic enclaves migrants are sheltered from some of the ruptures brought about by immigration – the loss of localized kin and social networks, the inability to transfer skills and education, and the like. They may be able to apply their knowledge and contribute

their skills in much the same way they did in their country of origin – as long as they do not leave the enclave. Portes and Wilson argue that the “payoff of education, occupational status, and objective information appears as great among those employed in enclave enterprises as for those working in the mainstream center economy” (1980:314). While the income and occupational effects of the enclave economy have been challenged or qualified by other researchers (Gilbertson and Gurak, 1992; Zhou and Logan, 1989; Sanders and Lee, 1987), it is clear at least that the ethnic enclave provides social benefits to immigrants, benefits that are not purely economic. Among the most important of these is sustaining male immigrants’ own status self-image by immersing them in a social environment of people in their same situation.

The second way in which male immigrants can minimize their feelings of status inconsistency is through participation in immigrant organizations. Migrant sojourners join organizations to reconstruct the social networks and perpetuate socialization patterns of the home country. Ethnic organizations offer immigrants an alternative to adaptation to the receiving country by providing an environment which, like the ethnic enclave, recognizes their social standing in spite of whatever downward economic mobility they may have suffered in the United States. The president of the Organization of Colombian Professionals noted:

There are many professionals who feel completely isolated because of the fact of their having been professionals, and then coming to this country and finding a completely different situation; it produces chaos. So we have to extract the professional [from his life here] even if he’s working in a factory, and we invite him to our meetings, and we make him participate. There’s nothing in our [organization’s] by-laws that asks whether a person is [still] a professional; as long as they have graduated from a university . . . we don’t even worry if they are illegal or citizens. . . . Many find a satisfaction in meeting professionals again and talking of things that a person often does not have the opportunity to talk about. Often a person arrives to this country completely alone, without – from the social perspective – any contact at all other than with a class of persons with no education, and in poor working conditions. . . .

In this manner the issue of status inconsistency (between the education and abilities achieved and recognized in their countries of origin and the occupational positions they hold in this country) is set aside or bracketed – again, as long as immigrant men remain in the social environs of immigrant organizations.

In the social networks of the ethnic economic enclave and those of the immigrant organization, a Latin-American male immigrant’s status depends (at least initially, upon his arrival) on what he was before, not what he is now.

Based on his status in his home country, he will be welcomed into organizations in this country where members hold similar status – regardless of his current occupational position in the labor force. However, a man has status in an immigrant organization only insofar as he held status in his country of origin and would hold that status again if he returned. His status here is provisional and dependent on his status in his home country. For this reason, a man may find it in his interest to emphasize ties to his home country and the possibility of his return. In many cases this return remains purely hypothetical, but men's emphases on ties to the home country nonetheless underline their claims to social status. This, of course, has effects on the political and organizational life of the immigrant community.

With the loss of status in the receiving country, men tend to form, participate in and lead ethnic organizations whose interests and focus is in the country of origin. There are dozens of such Latin American immigrant organizations in Queens. Their orientation is overwhelmingly toward the home country, and their actions accentuate home country ties. These organizations, for instance, all raise money for charitable concerns. But the money they collect goes for orphanages and hospitals in the home country, not in the United States. For example, the Dominican club *Hermanos Unidos*, in Corona, Queens, collects money for gifts and medical supplies to take down to poor neighborhoods in the Dominican Republic each year. They give out sports equipment, clothing, wheelchairs, and crutches among other things to children, the elderly, and the infirm of their home town.

Because of the role ethnic institutions play for men in validating their social status, and because this social status is tied to the home country, men are generally not interested in seeing ethnic institutions shift their orientation towards the receiving country. This would undermine their provisional status, particularly if they were newly arrived. This is likely to be particularly true of male leadership in ethnic organizations. Leadership positions in ethnic institutions are almost entirely filled by men, and male leaders, more than other men, depend on the social setting of the immigrant organizations, and their homeward orientation, for their positions of status in the immigrant community. This makes it unlikely, in the short run, that the organizational structure in the immigrant community will serve as an instrument of resocialization and redirect immigrants' focus to social and political issues in the United States.

Hoskin (1989:354) states that: "Almost by definition, ethnic organizations value continuity of identification over change to the norms of the host society." While she may be correct, she does not offer an explanation of why

organizations might retard immigrant orientation to the receiving country. I argue that gendered social roles and expectations explain a great deal, though of course not all, of the continuation of patterns of socialization and organization from the home country in the Latin American immigrant community in Queens. As the years pass, however, there are two possibilities – the first is that if and when a different basis for status is obtained as the result of upward mobility in the new society, then it may be less painful for men to change the direction of immigrant organizations. Of course there is also the chance that if immigrants are not successful in rebuilding their status to the level they had in their home country, then they may redouble efforts to maintain a social sphere separate from the society they find themselves in, policing ethnic boundaries and keeping up an ideology of return to the home country. The second possibility is that a younger leadership, primarily born or raised in the United States, will eventually challenge the first generation immigrant leaders and attempt to reorient the focus of immigrant organizations. This potential for change in orientation, however, is only slowly being realized.

While male-dominated organizations choose to appeal to the home country, women and others on the margins of immigrant organizational structures choose instead to appeal directly to arbiters in their new political environment. The choice of strategy, I argue, is gendered. Not only are women more likely to shift their orientation toward the United States, but a subset of female activists are more inclined to participate in American politics. There are two arguments for exploring the question of Latin-American immigrant women's orientation toward and involvement in political life in the United States – one general and the other more specific. The broader argument is about why Latin-American immigrant women in general are more likely than immigrant men to identify with political life here rather than in the home country. The more specific argument is about why a particular group of women involve themselves in New York City's politics and are proportionally overrepresented in appointed positions in state and city government, as intermediaries between government and immigrants in New York City. Together, these arguments point to how their general position as women, together with their political socialization both here and in their country of origin, leads Latina immigrant activists to become more involved in American politics and inclines them to be more likely to look for solutions to ease the costs of participation within the American political system rather than from their countries of origin.

WOMEN AND IMMIGRATION

In the last fifteen years, there has been some change in the study and evaluation of immigration patterns. Previously it was assumed that men migrated first, and women and children followed. Men therefore made most of the decisions about immigration – when and where it would take place. In the 1970s there was a new emphasis within the academic literature on household decisionmaking – that decisions took place within the context of families, with individuals making decisions with the household in mind – and therefore one had to look at each person's strategy within the context of the household. With this revised perspective there is increasing recognition of the extent to which legal immigration to the United States is, by a small but significant margin, female. In the last decades, the United States has received more immigrant women than men from almost every sending country.³ This is true for New York City as well (*see* Table 1). Immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Colombia make up the first and second largest non-Puerto-Rican Latino migrant populations in New York. From 1982 to 1989, women made up, respectively, 51 percent and 54 percent of the migrant stream from these countries to the city (Salvo and Ortiz, 1991:74). The percentages of women from the Dominican Republic and Colombia were as high as 57 percent and 66 percent respectively, from 1976 to 1978 (Gurak and Kritz, 1982:16).

Latin-American immigrant women, migrating to the United States as members of households together with immigrant men, often share the idea of returning to their home country. The household's goal to rapidly accumulate savings in order to return means that women suddenly play a much greater role in contributing to the household's expenses and savings. Women are much more likely to work in New York City than they are in the home country. For example, 31 percent of Dominican women were employed at some time before migration, but 91.5 percent worked for pay at some time in the United States, with 51 percent currently in the workforce (Pessar, 1987:105–106). Likewise, 57 percent of Colombian women worked prior to immigrating, 92.7 percent had worked in the United States, and 66 percent were currently in the workforce (Gurak and Kritz, 1982:18, 1984). Women's employment goes counter to middle-class expectations held in the home

³Prior to 1930, the annual sex ratio of new immigrants to the United States was almost always over 120 males for every 100 females. This was determined at least in part by immigration law. Until 1952, women could not sponsor their spouses. Changes in immigration law allowed women to become "pioneer" immigrants (Salvo and Ortiz, 1991:73–74). For an overview of sex ratios and female immigration to the United States, *see* Houston *et al.*, 1984; for an overview of some of the recent literature on women and immigration, *see* Pedraza, 1991.

TABLE 1
SEX RATIOS: WOMEN FOR EVERY HUNDRED MEN
AMONG LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK CITY

Top 20 Countries	106
All Immigrants	102
Colombia	115
Honduras	111
El Salvador	106
Dominican Republic	105
Ecuador	104
Peru	103

Source: Salvo and Ortiz, 1991:74 – Figure 4.3.

country, but is rationalized – perhaps more by their husbands than by the women themselves – by saying that it will only be for a short while. Work is only justified as long as it is for the good of the family. Within the context of the Latin American family, women's work is meant to be temporary, not an end itself.

Immigrant women's entrance into the workforce does not entail economic or social parity with immigrant men. A greater proportion of women work after coming to the United States, but the jobs they take are more likely than men's to be low-skill blue collar work in manufacturing or the garment industry. Women stay at these jobs longer than men and so are less upwardly mobile. Women generally work fewer hours, work less regularly, and get paid less for the work they do than do men. (*See* García Castro, 1982:27, on Colombian immigrant women; Gurak, 1988, on Colombian and Dominican women; *see also* Urrea Giraldo, 1982; Sullivan, 1984:1057–1059; Long, 1980.) In part, this is because women's participation in the labor force does not relieve them of their traditional family responsibilities (Pesquera, 1993; Marx Ferree, 1979). This does not mean that married women and married women with children are less likely to participate in the workforce. On the contrary, both categories show greater labor force participation than female heads of households (Gurak and Kritz, 1992:7; Chaney, 1980:289; *also see* MacPherson and Stewart, 1989:66). But the immigrant woman's role in the family does affect her participation in the workforce. Women are more likely than men to take jobs in smaller businesses in their immediate neighborhood, or in Queens (although the modal response is still Manhattan), presumably so they can stay closer to their families, and to take more flexible jobs which offer lower pay (García Castro, 1982:27). Women are still expected to play certain traditional roles in the family, particularly with respect to children, while engaging in work.

In spite of all this, women's employment does mean that immigrant women have economic resources they did not have in their home country. Employment may even be easier in this country for women than for men, and

they may earn as much an hour (although they often work fewer hours). As women take pay home, this leads to a renegotiation of decisionmaking in most households (assuming they are married). Whereas prior to immigration the predominant pattern was that the senior male either controlled all household expenditures or allocated an allowance to his spouse, in the United States the modal pattern becomes the "pooled household" where all income earners place all or part of their earnings in a common pot and jointly decide how the money will be spent (Pessar, 1987:121; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991:148). Women may then keep part of their paychecks for their own expenses and remittances (Gonzalez, 1976:37-38; Pessar, 1987:122).

As women experience the benefits of working and controlling their earnings, their long-term strategies can begin to diverge from men's (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994:100, 1992, Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991:156, 158). While men continue to hold to the maxim that "five dollars spent here means five more years before returning home," some accounts describe how many women begin spending accumulated savings in this country. This progressively postpones return to their country of origin, where opportunities for work are limited and social control is more strict (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991:156; Pessar, 1987:123; García Castro, 1982:30-31). Women are aware that return will mean, in most cases, going back to the male head-of-household pattern, and they may not be eager to relinquish their new-found decisionmaking authority (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994:146; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991:155). For example, late one night a group of neighbors, all women, were talking about their relationships with men. Two said they do not want men to support them; they have no intention of being obliged to men. On the other hand, another said that when she married her first husband at age eighteen her husband supported her so she did not have to work (she is now separated from her husband and lives with her daughter). The first two women both said they left home to get away from that feeling of obligation. Having their own means of income allows women to escape the feeling of obligation to men, to be able to enter into relationships with men on their own terms. This extends, as well, beyond relationships with men to those with the family in general. In short, women have economic and personal incentives for abandoning the original strategy of accumulation and return. They may reevaluate the idea that success entails a return to the home country and staying means failure. Staying, for women, may be a significant improvement in their overall position.

Immigrant women's desire to change the terms of their relationships can lead to conflict in previously existing relationships. Married women, for example, might find that their husbands are not willing to renegotiate house-

TABLE 2
MARITAL STATUS OF FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS IN QUEENS

	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Separated	Never Married
Men	51.2	1.0	5.7	3.8	38.3
Women	46.7	6.5	9.7	6.7	30.4

Source: 1990 Census 5% PUMS Sample.

hold decisionmaking. The conflict over gender roles can lead to additional strains on marriages already taxed by the migration process and the decision of whether or not to stay in the United States (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991:156). Separation and divorce are common – the number of immigrant women who are heads of households increases significantly in the United States (Gilbertson and Gurak, 1992; Landsdale and Ogena, 1995). Responses in Queens to the 1990 PUMS found that 22.2 percent of women were either widowed, separated, or divorced versus 10.5 percent of men (*see* Table 2). Gurak and Kritz estimate that about 44 percent of Dominican women and 25 percent of Colombian women in New York City have experienced some kind of marital disruption.

WOMEN AND SETTLEMENT

Women on their own have to develop alternative economic strategies – since earning a living working full-time, making low wages, while simultaneously bringing up children is next to impossible. Women who find themselves in this situation are likely to receive assistance from the state. In general, it is clear that immigrant women are more aware than immigrant men of social welfare programs available to them. Women's networks of coworkers and friends, most of whom are women, keep them apprised of what programs are available. In times of sustained need, women are much more likely to turn to government programs than are men (*see* Gurak and Kritz, 1984). A large number of immigrant women receive welfare or aid for their dependent children (AFDC) – 56 percent of Dominican women receive some form of assistance, as do 25 percent of Colombians (Gurak and Kritz, 1982, 1984). Note that this correlates closely with the percentage of women in each group who are single heads-of-household with children: 63 percent of Colombian and 88 percent of Dominican female heads-of-household receive welfare benefits; 45.7 percent of Colombian and 69 percent of Dominican female heads-of-household receive AFDC (Gurak and Kritz, 1992:Table 1). Child care is prohibitively expensive, and networks for child care (through friends or relatives) which existed in the home country are absent or unreliable. Without the social networks that existed in their home countries, women turn for help to city and state agency programs. All in all, being alone with children means

that women are more likely than men to have contact with the institutions and programs of the federal and local government.

The existing sociological literature is lax in looking at women's experiences with their children or child care except inasmuch as this affects the mother's ability to work. Even working women continue to be the primary caretakers of their children (regardless of how much housework is juggled in a two-income household) and, as such, come into contact with a whole set of institutions through their children – the health care and educational systems, for example. Public institutions play important roles in the lives of immigrant children and their mothers. Education is seen by immigrants as the primary path for social improvement (*la manera de subir, de mejorarse*) – not always for themselves, but certainly for their children (García Castro, 1982:24; Pessar, 1987:124). Mothers, for instance, will go out of their way to take jobs which are flexible enough to allow them to see their children to and from school. Again, this gives immigrant women (much more than immigrant men) contact with public institutions.

It is easy to see how men's and women's economic strategies begin to diverge with their experiences in this country. If they stay married or attached, women acquire greater independence and power with their income, which gives them an increased incentive to stay in this country. If they separate, even if they wish to go back, their strategy will likely change; accumulating savings becomes almost impossible with the strain of raising children and working. In either case, if they have children they will come into contact with a wide range of public institutions, giving them a broader experience with governmental structures than immigrant men have. In general, then, immigrant women have both pressures and incentives to orient their strategies toward this country and away from their country of origin.

These pressures and incentives lead to a greater desire to stay in the United States, a desire which, among other things, is translated into becoming naturalized as citizens. Women immigrants disproportionately become citizens; but among those from a handful of Latin American countries, the tendency for women to become citizens is much greater than that for men (*see* Table 3), even taking into account their greater proportion among legal immigrants to the city. This is particularly true for Dominican and Colombians and among Hondurans and Salvadorans. The numbers of women from other countries becoming U.S. citizens are also skewed, though to a lesser extent.

This, however, is not sufficient to explain why women are disproportionately represented as the appointed mediators between governmental institutions and other immigrants. After all, while the majority of women may shift their orientations somewhat to further their interests and those of their fami-

TABLE 3
SEX RATIOS OF PERSONS NATURALIZED FROM 1982–1987 IN NEW YORK CITY
NUMBER OF WOMEN FOR EVERY HUNDRED MEN

Country	Naturalization: Women/100 Men	Legal Immigration: Women/100 Men
Dominican Republic	149	105
Colombia	145	115
Ecuador	116	104
Cuba	110	NA
Honduras	161	111
El Salvador	161	106
Peru	109	103
All Immigrants	118	102

Source: Salvo and Ortiz, 1991:47.

lies here in this country, this does not mean that they will necessarily choose a life of political activism. Immigrant women are more likely to become citizens than men are, and they are perhaps more likely to vote once they are citizens, but like most people, few will devote their full energies to political involvement. Most women view politics with suspicion (*see* Pessar, 1987:114) and the number of women so involved is actually quite small. For this select group of women, activism is reinforced by other factors in their lives.

WOMEN AND POLITICS

Immigrant activists, both men and women, generally draw on their experiences and socialization in politics, or social organization more broadly defined. These premigratory experiences provide the patterns and blueprints which immigrants then put to use in the context of New York City. Like men, women participate actively in immigrant organizations. These organizations are usually founded and run by men. Organizational life in the Latin-American immigrant community is dominated by men. This is especially evident in Dominican organizational life in Queens, which revolves around social clubs. The Hermanos Unidos club in Corona, for example, has about 350 male members and 25 female dues paying members. South American organizations have a more even sex ratio in their membership, but men monopolize leadership posts in almost all of these groups (excepting those which are specifically women's groups, or *ramas femininas* – women's branches – of more general (male) groups. Men are presidents and vice-presidents; women are left as minor functionaries. Women are allowed to run the concessions stands and prepare events, while men do the public speaking and posturing (*see* Hardy-Fanta, 1993; *see also* Naples, 1991; Pardo, 1990). At a citywide public forum, a Colombian organizer sat and took names by the door. I asked her how she had gotten stuck with that job. "This is women's

work," she said sarcastically. "You'll never see a man doing this." Women have few opportunities for leadership within the organizational structures of the immigrant community itself. The handful of organizations specifically organized by and for Latin American women provide some outlet for women's initiative and leadership, but these organizations are generally also oriented toward the home country. The difference is that the women in these organizations often play a dual role; they are also involved as activists and organizers for Latin American immigrant interests in New York.

Women, like men, draw on their premigratory experiences for the knowledge and expertise needed to run organizations. Activist immigrant women's initial experiences with politics are usually in their country of origin. Their first mentors are members of their own families who initiate them into political and organizational life. The metaphor of politics passed on biologically, carried in the blood somehow, is a common one. Activist women often comment on how their political interests are something inherited, almost genetic. This inheritance, their participation in their home countries, becomes a model for their participation and organization in the United States.

Latina activists' political socialization, however, does not end there. Activist women share many of the same experiences other Latin-American immigrant women have. Almost all work. Many have been married; most are mothers. Like many other immigrant women, their initial years in this country are taken up with work and family. As women have more time for themselves, their husbands have difficulties accepting their wives' new roles and commitments, and the men often oppose the idea of their wives getting involved in organizing and attending meetings alone.

A female activist's full devotion to organizational life often does not start up until these concerns are taken care of in one way or another. Their children grow older, so they have no obligations there. Many are divorced, giving them greater independence. Like other immigrant women, activists' experiences with their families and work have led them to reevaluate their commitments.

It is true that many of these activist women are less vulnerable than are other immigrant women. Many have college educations, and they are fluent in English (whereas most immigrants try hard to know enough of the language *para defenderse*, to defend themselves, and women generally know less English than do men (García Castro, 1982)). Finally, their employment, often initially in the social service bureaucracy, provides them with financial security and an entrée into American political life. These advantages are crucial and provide activists with many of the necessary skills to work as intermediaries between immigrants and the local and state governments of New

York. As women talk about their work, however, they recognize the special role they play. An Ecuadorian activist, describes, for example, her work in Queens family court:

. . . I had a certain political interest there too, if you want to call it that, because I realized that the Hispanic woman who went to the court to ask for help with her family problems (and I say Hispanic woman because it was mostly the woman who sought help) had a lot of difficulties – she didn't know the system, she didn't understand, she was poorly informed. . . . [T]he courts had interpreters, and we were the bridge that helped a person make herself understood in the institution, but we also helped a little to orient her in this country. . . .

If Latina activists become mediators between immigrants and the governmental bureaucracies, they are also acknowledging and building on their experiences as immigrants and as women.

While men are likely to keep a sojourner mentality, and organizations dominated by men will focus on the home country, activist immigrant women are more likely to turn to the problems of the immigrant community in this country. One woman noted:

It was natural that people who came over in large numbers would want to get together, so they formed civic organizations. And men were always the leaders, because in Latin America men were always the leaders. Women in politics were seen as strange. When I was growing up as a girl in Ecuador, it was not the thing for women to do. Men here are more interested in politics there. They do good things, raise money, but they are not interested in what goes on here. They have status in the community; they are *caciques* [leaders]. But they aren't interested in starting over – to begin with, to have to learn English. If they got involved in politics here they wouldn't be *caciques* anymore. They would only play a small part. So women and Puerto Ricans tend to dominate local politics in Queens – Puerto Ricans because of their experience in politics, women because they are willing to work with others.

Queens politics provides immigrant women an opening for action.

Activist women have both the motive and the opportunity to play the role of political intermediaries (see Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Uni, 1991). As immigrants, Latinas' primary loyalties remain to their home countries, but, as women, they find themselves facing new problems in New York. As activists, they have the skills needed to organize, but they are marginalized within immigrant organizations and so turn to alternative forms of participation and organization. For city and state government agencies looking for people to serve as intermediaries between government and the fast-growing population of immigrants, these activist women make ideal intermediaries. For the women themselves, these positions offer a chance for leadership unavailable in immigrant organizations. These mediating roles may be frustrating –

women remain beholden to their political patrons within New York's political establishment. But these roles also give women a great deal of visibility among Latin American immigrants in Queens and make them likely contenders for political office, should any choose to run.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTORAL POLITICS

It is clear the situation for Latin American immigrants in Queens and in New York City is changing rapidly, particularly following the reapportionment of electoral districts that took place in 1991. Immigrants and immigrant groups – particularly those already on the margins of the immigrant communities – are to some extent beginning to redirect their efforts towards their communities in the United States rather than anticipating return to their countries of origin. This is particularly true of Latin American women, who are more likely than men to find reasons for adapting to their stay in the United States. The change in women's long-term strategies is reflected in their higher naturalization and participation rates in American politics. It is reflected as well in the willingness of Latina activists to engage in American politics rather than simply mirroring the ambivalence of mainstream immigrant organizations toward politics.

It is uncertain, however, how the willingness of Latina activists to engage in American politics will translate in electoral politics. Until now, Latin American women have been likely to play the role of ethnic intermediaries, serving as facilitators or negotiators between immigrants and the American political and bureaucratic system. Latin American men have taken charge of the mainstream immigrant organizations. Therefore, Latin American immigrant men and women occupy different leadership niches. It is still an open question as to which leadership cluster will be better positioned to enter into the electoral sphere. On the one hand, immigrant women have more experience in dealing with American institutions, and so they might seem to be the natural choices to step into electoral politics. In a way, these elected positions might be seen simply as an extension of women's mediating role between immigrants and American society. On the other hand, activist women have been able to succeed in constructing the critical mediating roles they do precisely because these roles have been undervalued by the rest of the immigrant population. Men are still seen by many immigrant men and women as providing the more appropriate leadership for the community. Until now, male leadership has focused its energies in first generation organizations, where men can maintain their social status even if their economic status declines. However, over time, as participation in the American sphere becomes more

valued, men may begin to supplant women as the most visible intermediaries between immigrants and the broader society.

In one scenario, then, men will run for elected office, crowding women to the background. Some women activists are convinced that men will want those leadership positions regardless of whether they are qualified or not; they are concerned that women might cede them these positions, if that is the price for men's participation. Even if there are women who, having spent years as activists mediating between the immigrant community and broader American institutions, would be more qualified candidates for elected positions than men, the expectations are that when these positions open, men will likely step forward to take them.

However, there has been some indication that events can turn out otherwise. Nydia Velasquez and Elizabeth Colon, the two leading candidates against Congressman Solarz in the 1992 primary elections for Congressional District 12 (which includes parts of Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Corona in Queens, while also stretching into Brooklyn and Manhattan) were both Puerto Rican women who had come into politics through community organizations and mediating institutions between government and Puerto Rican migrants. In an upset victory, Nydia Velasquez won the primary and went on to be elected the first Puerto Rican congresswoman. While both women were Puerto Rican and not immigrants per se, they indicate the potential women may have of using the intermediary positions they occupy to launch electoral political careers and the support they may be able to garner from Latino voters willing to accommodate themselves to the idea of female leadership. Thus things may be changing in more ways than one. A Colombian respondent captured the mood: "It's time," she stated, "that we stop letting ourselves be used. If [men] are not going to give us what they promised, then we are not going to help them or support them either."

CONCLUSION

Grasmuck and Pessar's (1991) insights on gendered differences within household immigration strategies have been applied primarily to explain the divergence of male and female immigrants' views on settlement and return. But these differences can also explain a great deal about why, in the receiving country, immigrants' organizational strategies and approaches to politics might also vary by gender. The argument outlined in this article provides a theoretical base for the empirical observations noted in a variety of contexts by a number of authors looking at contemporary immigrant organization and mobilization in the United States. These authors have noted that immigrant

women are often more active in community-building efforts than are men, without necessarily explaining why. Building on the case of first generation Latin-American immigrants in Queens, this article lays out a logic outlining why men's and women's immigration experiences, and the social benefits they seek out of organizational life, would lead to very different political strategies. While men are more likely to remain involved in first generation immigrant organizations, women more often take on the role of intermediaries between the immigrant community and the surrounding society. This finding only reinforces the necessity for more gender-nuanced research in the immigration field. Moreover, taking gender differences seriously should also lend support to the idea of reexamining the broader question which has always bedeviled the study of immigration. The question of whether the immigrant experience in general is one of ruptures or continuities should be reinterpreted so as to ask when, and under what conditions, does immigrant socialization continue, shift, or break.

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