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# 'Because I'm a Fighter': Examining Salvadoran Women's Leadership Toolkit

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## ABSTRACT

To center the experiences of twenty Salvadoran women from the Washington, D.C. metro area, I use intersectionality as a conceptual framework. Starting from the vantage point of intersecting identities, these women build on gender and immigrant experiences to remain “fearless fighters” and “leave footprints” with their activism. However, sexism and racism press on their feelings of empowerment and force them to employ resistance strategies to sustain a commitment to immigrant rights. This article adopts an intersectional lens—to make sense of the opportunities and oppression that simultaneously render Salvadoran identities salient—while speaking to social movement scholarship addressing immigrant women's activism.

## KEYWORDS

Salvadoran; Washington; D.C.; intersectionality; activist mothering; humility

## Introduction

To combat the “whiteness” in social movement scholarship, women of color employed an intersectional lens, one which challenged a shared gender identity and experiences, and, instead, unraveled dimensions of power and privilege among activists (Cho et al., 2013; Romero, 2018; Roth, 2004). Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined “intersectionality” in 1989, reminds us that in order to do a proper analysis of women's activism, we “need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1995, 358). Robnett notes that, “it is equally important to analyze the different movement experiences as determined by one's race, class, and gender” (1996, 1663). To this end, scholars subsequently moved the trifecta of race, class, and gender to include other identities, and this has led to both localized and international accounts of intersectionality in praxis and social justice work (Evans & Lepinard, 2020; Marchetti et al., 2021). In this article, I examine the identities and experiences of Salvadoran women in the Washington, D.C. metro area to make them worthy of stewarding intersectionality and put them on the map in the terrain of social movement studies.

Salvadoran women included in the study are “informal leaders” who feel joy in supporting their compatriots but steer away from leading an organization or being a high-profile member of a group. They were handpicked by other community members but also agreed to be interviewed and share their story. They shared stories about fighting hard and working tirelessly for respect, equality, and justice but are never “formally” visible in immigrant rights movements (Perez Huber, 2020). I argue their identities help them thrive but also become costs—engendering machismo from their Salvadoran male counterparts and racism from white women. This examination considers how they respond to these costs by building their “leadership toolkit”—a

concept that underscores framing themselves as leaders, distinct from their male compatriots and white women, to fight alongside their community members.

## Her-storical backdrop

Scholarly accounts show Salvadoran women have a longstanding political history in which their active participation was instrumental in reshaping discourse on family, social justice and feminism in their homeland (Sierra Becerra, 2017; Viterna, 2006). Having endured a twelve-year civil war, Salvadoran women were at the center of the political struggle in El Salvador as they capitalized on any available resource to voice their concerns. Schirmer recounts how Salvadoran women were able to build informal organizations noting, “[b]ecause so many women are marginalized from the formal political settings of political party, trade union and Church hierarchy, they learn to create their own flexible forms of organization outside the rules of the game” (1993, 44). Salvadoran women were uniquely positioned to strategize, mobilize, and make demands (Shayne, 1999; Stephen, 1995) even when differences emerged. The literature suggests that some of these differences ranged from social class backgrounds (Wood, 2003; Kampwirth, 2004) to participatory roles (Viterna, 2006) and the types of formal/informal organizing work (Aleman, 2013; Ready, 1999).

Despite Salvadoran women’s “her-story” and the roots of their activism, they grappled with machismo<sup>1</sup> and marianismo<sup>2</sup> in Salvadoran society and this seeped into social movement work. Women were placed in a double-edged sword where they could use their femininity and attendant stereotypes to mark their way through and within social movements but could also be subjected to sexual violence or sexual favors as a consequence of their gender (Aleman, 2013). While not specifically discussing El Salvador but Latin America (in general), Stevens (1973) is the first scholar to suggest machismo propelled women toward marianismo as a means to safeguard their roles and rights. However, Ehler (1991) refutes this claim and instead suggests these concepts do not grasp the lack of material and political power subjugating women; especially, women facing economic vulnerabilities and treated as second-class citizens. As Stephens reminds us, “[if] we want to understand how and why people act, we must deeply consider the synthetic effects of their own experience on their behavior. This prevents us from portraying women activists as flattened, uniform caricatures who either fall on one side or another of some universal feminist continuum” (1995, 824).

In contrast to their efforts in El Salvador, Salvadoran women’s participation in the diaspora is not as widely recognized. For instance, most accounts of the U.S.-based Sanctuary and Solidarity movements of the 1980s (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991; Nepstad & Smith, 2001), which sought to raise awareness of Salvadoran immigrants as refugees in need of legal protections, it is the men that are presumably leading the advocacy work—including forming locally-based coalitions and policy-making at the national scale. Consequently, there are hardly any testimonials of Salvadoran women’s activism in the U.S. One exception is Lynn Stephen’s (1994) work which tells the story of Maria Teresa Tula, a woman whose activism started in El Salvador and continued in the U.S. The Salvadoran activist “her-story” is a work in progress, especially in sites like the Washington, D.C. metro area, which is the second largest destination for Salvadorans.<sup>3</sup>

The literature on Salvadoran women in the D.C. metro area notes several challenges in their incorporation process. Namely, Salvadoran women face economic vulnerabilities related to domestic and service sector work. Additionally, they experience legal challenges while leading transnational lives because of families they left behind in El Salvador and continue to financially support (Molina, 2008; Repak, 1995). In drawing attention to the Salvadoran “invisible leaders” in the D.C. metro area, I want to break what Abrego (2017) calls “the silences.” Indeed, these “silences” often leave out Salvadoran women from academic discussions on Latina feminisms (Silliman et al., 2004; Sandoval, 1991), care work (Romero, 2002), or leadership abilities (Pardo, 1990). To help expand what Hancock calls, “the stewardship of intersectionality” (2016, 21), I turn the lens toward Salvadoran women as “informal leaders,” serving as “comadres,”<sup>4</sup> and being

“*cachimbonas*”<sup>5</sup> (bad-asses), while noting some of the obstacles they face in the process. In the next section, I piece out the different sets of literature that help me construct their “her-stories.”

## Literature review

### *Leadership and intersectionality*

For the purpose of this study, I engage with two sets of conversations addressing women’s leadership. First, leadership can take many forms including the “behind-the-scenes” activism (Choudry, 2015) noted in various accounts of immigrant women activists (Milkman & Terriquez, 2012; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Ricourt & Danta, 2003). Indeed, some leaders are only “known” to insiders because they do not occupy any “formal” leadership role in organizations preferring to engage in close-knit interpersonal relations as a “server” of the people. Sacks (1988) and Robnett (1996) study these “behind-the-scenes” women leaders and find that they prefer to influence their compatriots to lead the way rather than attribute titles or recognition to themselves. In effect, they are a valuable support system, a “comadre,” for the people that trust them and can rely on them to address community-based concerns.

The second way of addressing leadership is through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality has an important history in locating and addressing social inequities and building epistemological understandings of marginalized folks (Hancock, 2016; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Cho et al., 2013). Romero’s (2018) metaphor of the Rubik’s cube, for example, encapsulates the various identities and oppressions that drive some scholars to employ intersectionality in their work. In particular, studies addressing immigrant leadership show the interrelated processes of creating agency and navigating structural positioning (Chun et al., 2013; Cherubini & Tudela-Vazquez, 2016) to fight for liberation.

While intersectionality is an important intervention used to unravel how leaders embody identities and employ toolkits to fight for their rights, studies focused on Latinx immigrant activism have homogenized Central Americans (Blackwell, 2010; Pardo, 1990; Fregoso, 2003; Coll, 2004). Arturo Arias (2003) calls for a Central-American American diasporic consciousness to emerge where distinctions matter and unique stories come to fruition. Indeed, according to Alvarado (2013) because Central Americans are marginalized in these conversations, “this pervasive marginality places them at a considerable disadvantage when claiming political space and rights to equal cultural standing” (2013, 369). It is this marginal space that scholars using intersectionality as a conceptual framework want to reclaim. And so, to move Central Americans out of the margins and center their distinctiveness, my work focuses on Salvadorans—a group that Roque Dalton’s (1974) “Poema de Amor” identifies as “los guanacos.”

### *Salvadoran social movements*

Within social movement scholarship, the mobilization efforts taking place during the Salvadoran Civil War are an important point of departure, followed by Sanctuary and Solidarity struggles in the U.S. For example, Wood (2003) and Gamson (1991) study El Salvador to enhance social movement theory but the Salvadoran campesinos and those in “la lucha” (or the cause) are mostly men. To fill this gap, Shayne (1999) and Viterna (2006) discuss women revolutionary bridge builders during the Salvadoran civil war while Kampwirth (2004) and Ready (1999) write about Salvadoran women revolutionaries in the post-civil war period. In the U.S., the mobilization practices of white mainstream actors (like the Catholic Church, white middle-class progressives, and non-Salvadoran leaders) during the Sanctuary and Solidarity movement (Nepstad & Smith, 2001; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991) are examined.<sup>6</sup> Perla and Coutin (2009) note this leaves out Salvadorans who took part in the Sanctuary and Solidarity struggles by: offering their testimonies to remain in the United States, using their know-how to mobilize the population, pushing for policy changes by

suing the federal government, and establishing refugee centers and organizations to produce safe spaces for the newly arrived.

Stories of Salvadoran women do not extend to those that perhaps carried their activism to the U.S. There have not been overarching testimonies capturing the war and migration stories of Salvadoran women and how these might impact their activism as immigrant women. The threads that do exist about Salvadoran women's activism in the U.S. note their leadership capabilities in labor struggles across New York and Los Angeles (Gordon, 1995; Milkman, 2000). Until recently, scholars discuss newer generations of women as the new wave of Salvadoran activists within immigrant rights movements (Milkman & Terriquez, 2012; Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). With the emergence of more Salvadorans in the academy, I suspect there will be more opportunities to discover, rediscover, and tell the stories.

### ***Salvadoran women in the U.S***

My first encounter with Salvadoran women in the U.S. was not in the social movement literature but in immigration scholarship. Here, scholars underscored “how gender as a social system contextualizes migration processes for all immigrants” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999, 566). Menjivar (1999) and Zentgraf (2002) noticed Salvadoran immigrant women in the service sector experience gender relations in nuanced ways. In some cases, the gender hierarchy from the homeland is reproduced with women occupying a lower status in the home relative to their male partners; whereas in other cases, women created their own sense of independence, through their labor, to challenge their intimate partners. In recent work, the Salvadoran “family” unit is analyzed through and within a transnational social field (Abrego, 2014). Specifically, this scholarship contends with the impact of immigration policies on families with varying legal/illegal statuses in the U.S. (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). There is still ample room, however, to explore Salvadoran agentic lives. This engagement with Salvadoran women in the Washington, D.C. metro area serves to: 1. Expand the Salvadoran story outside of the West Coast 2. Discuss the leadership of Salvadoran women 3. Intertwine intersectionality with other social movement concepts and 4. Explore the hardships/resistance-building in becoming a fighter.

### **Data and methods**

In the summer of 2012, I conducted face-to-face interviews of twenty Salvadoran women. The questions were open-ended allowing for any response, while the format of the interview was semi-structured so I could jump to a question as it fit the conversation. When I first entered the recruitment site, the consulate general office in the D.C. metro area,<sup>7</sup> I was curious to know what went on. As this was the second time that I was conducting research on Salvadoran political culture in the metro D.C. area, I was able to consult my sources and they described the new consulate as a “cachimbona.” In their eyes, she was an intelligent and personable woman with lots of nonprofit experience and welcomed community members to use the space. Since she was well-respected by the community advocates, I asked for her permission to conduct my study. Initially, I volunteered every day to observe the site, and after a few weeks, I was allowed to recruit participants. The first few participants were handpicked by the consul who knew that I was looking to interview women who were seen as leaders in the Salvadoran community. She knew a couple of women who worked with her on different projects. For example, one of her contacts was a woman who conducted workshops on domestic violence in the consulate space. Another interviewee was a business owner who volunteered to cater food and made donations for events sponsored by the consulate office. Another community leader was a woman who owned a beauty salon and would instruct her customers on where to go for help or questions. From these interviewees, I was referred to other women who were known as influential, active, strong, and oriented toward community support. When I contacted women about the study, I

would ask two things: 1. Have you ever been involved in community work? 2. Would you like to share that story? I only interviewed those that granted me permission and lost several women who were reticent or would not follow-up. Indeed, what I discovered was that the women who did lead organizations were too busy or too guarded to share their personal story, so the women I was able to access ended up being the informal, invisible leaders who did make time for me. Once I started interviewing, I stopped volunteering every day because I was making trips to and from the preferred location of the interviewee. The women that became part of the study do not spearhead a cause or Salvadoran organization in the metro area,<sup>8</sup> and are quite pleased to be retired or work/volunteer part-time in nonprofits. The women who worked full-time were in government jobs, social services, or self-employed, and saw their jobs as separate from what they enjoy doing in the community. They described themselves as the go-to “comadres” that provided aid, information, resources and advocacy for their compatriots outside of what nonprofits or community-based associations could do.

Salvadoran women are especially crucial in the metro area because they were the pioneers initiating the migration stream to the nation’s capital (Repak, 1995). Currently, they comprise 46% of the total population. The demographic characteristics in the appendix show the range of women that participated in this study.<sup>9</sup> While the majority of women are first-generation immigrants, two are 1.5-generation immigrants whose parents migrated first. The median age is 47 and on average they have been residents in the area for 19 years. Their income and educational levels vary, the majority are either married or single, and I did not inquire about number of children.

Women were asked to relate their migration history,<sup>10</sup> organizing experience (how long have they been involved, what work do they do), what they learned from doing organizing work, whether they consider themselves activists or leaders, what obstacles they faced, and what motivates them to continue helping. Interviews were digitally recorded and on average lasted an hour. They took place in coffee shops, workplaces, and/or homes. The analysis of the interviews entailed transcribing the interviews from Spanish to English and then selectively coding them in NVivo 10 based on themes such as: Political or Economic Migration, Types of Organizational Work (Party politics, Cultural, Social), and Skills-sets. To maintain their anonymity, I use pseudonyms for the interviewees and provide my own translation of the interviewees’ quotes because I wanted to capture the Salvadoran vernaculars.

In the next section, I illustrate how Salvadoran women’s experiences contribute to the intersectional framework in several ways. First, as immigrant women, they conceive of “helping their compatriots” as a way to circumvent the structural challenges that they themselves have endured and continue to face because of their social positioning. Second, I underscore the unlevelled playing field they battle when it comes to facing machismo and discrimination in the Washington, D.C. metro area’s organizational landscape. Lastly, I show that while Salvadoran women are “cachimbonas,” they endure “costs” along the way, forcing them to employ tools to resist. In short, I conceive of intersectional theory as a call to action—pushing us to see why the very intersections that matter can be a source of power, conflict, and resistance.

## Doing intersections

### *“Fearless fighter” and “activist mothering”*

Naples describes “activist mothering” as all the actions,<sup>11</sup> including social activism addressing the needs of African-American and Puerto Rican community members who “work” as community brokers (1992, 448). This concept derives from the standpoint of the women who managed to connect reproductive labor with work, community with politics, and mothering with activism. “Activist mothering” helps me make sense of the lived experiences of the women in my sample. The women demonstrate a desire to include community members as part of their family and are at the ready to lend a hand, be a voice, and battle for immigrant-based

concerns—these can range from starting bilingual school programs to offering support to domestic violence survivors. I turn to two women I name Betty and Amber for the purpose of this discussion. They share important distinctions such as when and what motivated them to “help” and their different marital statuses. But, they share a similar understanding of being a woman and an immigrant which impact their activist trajectory. While Betty has been involved in community work since the early nineties, Amber started her activism after she arrived in the area, about 6 years ago, and after she left her abusive partner. While Betty’s first activist project entailed challenging the school system and was motivated by her own role as a mom, Amber started helping with domestic violence prevention after she survived her trauma and was ready to “fly like an eagle.” These distinctions do not stop Betty and Amber from embodying an “activist mothering” seeking to transform immigrant women from mom to advocate, from victim to survivor, from “comadre” to organizer. And, they do the community work for free, it is unpaid labor but laborious, and from their retelling, the value accrued to it is more rewarding than money because it allows them to distinguish themselves as “fearless fighters.” Betty embodies this in the following quote:

I’m always fighting for social issues. I’m not the kind of person who will fight for something that’s already created but prefer to fight for something that is in the works, developing itself...where I see there is a need that I can fill (Betty).

Betty’s activism evolved from one where she was young and energetic to withering away when she had a family. When I interviewed her, she was retired but thrilled to be “back” and fully present in the community. Betty says:

We as women after our 40s, it’s like we reach a moment of clarity...a new perspective on life and your priorities change because your kids grow up and you regain that desire that I always had to return to the community.

Betty’s “return” to community-based work is commonly experienced by other interviewees and reflects a gendered activist trajectory. Since family dynamics take center stage, women feel forced to retire (albeit temporarily) from community-based work to then return to it with full force. Additionally, as I am unpacking her story, I learn that her immigrant experience is important as it [in]forms her activism. Betty recalls being a teenager when she migrated from El Salvador to the Washington, D.C. metro area and always felt she would eventually return to her country once she finished high school. In one of her vacations back to El Salvador, she witnessed, first-hand, the extent of poverty and soon realized that although she could not change the world, she needed to do something for her compatriots. Subsequently, in her early activist years, Betty’s early “fight” was to advocate for more bilingual programs and Spanish translations of all school documents and this was informed by her own parenting struggles as an immigrant mom. When I met her, she was involved in workshopping health and reproductive rights for immigrant women. Her community involvement is as much an extension of what she would do for her children as is her solidarity with her immigrant counterparts, and so here, Betty’s intersectional identities construct her “activist mothering,” one that is grounded on protecting and aiding the community, but is possible because of the resilience and commitment to “fight fearlessly.”

Amber describes herself as single but was in an abusive relationship that she escaped by migrating to the metro area. Amber’s describes her “moment of clarity” as:

After having lived through a difficult domestic violence experience, something that I still don’t know how I put up with, I came out of it feeling like an eagle and have gained the wings to fly and am very satisfied with my life right now. I would love to serve my community more and especially help raise consciousness about domestic violence, and so this is why I am working on getting more education to build myself so I can give back (Amber).



Amber demonstrates a sense of resilience, which I call the “fearless fighter,” that develops from her past and what she has been through, but also her present and where she sees herself going. Having been in her own form of “combat” after enduring domestic violence, Amber is ready to “fly like an eagle” to help other women while simultaneously building her professional qualifications to better herself. Amber’s use of “love” and “serve” construct a form of giving back that a mother like Betty would know about. Their shared stories can be included as examples of “activist mothering,” as their actions reflect how their intersectional identities position them to be “fearless fighters,” where their power is reflected in their sustained commitment and resilience to fight for their compatriots.

### ***“Leaving footprints” to build a “collective citizenry”***

Schirmer’s (1993) notion of “collective citizenry” whereby activism is a shared responsibility that is passed down to daughters and sons is built on a case study of Salvadoran women members of CoMadres.<sup>12</sup> In my sample, the expression to “leave footprints” captures this intergenerational transmission of activism and, in so doing, extends the notion of collective citizenry. Indeed, “leaving footprints” is how my participants refer to “collective citizenry” in that there is a shared desire to leave a legacy of resistance. But, “leaving footprints” is also an attempt to counter one’s invisibility related to one’s intersectional identities. For example, Mariana explains why she is involved in community-based work:

I came to this country and I don’t want to go unnoticed, I’m not trying to be part of the Latino group and labeled as such, but rather I want to leave footprints...the kind that will remind people of who I was (Mariana).

In the last 23 years, Mariana worked on improving women’s health by hosting educational workshops on nutrition and exercise in her house. The impetus for her activism stems from her experiences as an immigrant mother. Mariana, who was pregnant when she migrated, remarks that even when she used to be a professional in El Salvador, in the United States her title means nothing—she says, “we have to incorporate ourselves, learn the language and customs.” She mentions having a difficult time being Salvadoran in the area since non-Salvadorans talk down to her because of her roots. Indeed, part of the desire to “leave footprints” is to offset the invisibility she feels when being othered. Her “Salvadoraness” and human capital skills are not valued because, by and large, she is essentialized as an immigrant woman. Similarly, Mariana feels the weight of being a woman and needing to “leave footprints” to challenge a gendering process where, according to her, “work inside the home never ends.” Thus, as Mariana embodies her identities as both an immigrant and a woman, her wanting to “leave footprints” becomes even more salient as it reflects a push toward [in]visibility outside the confines of being an immigrant woman in the home. To “leave footprints” means that Salvadorans can remember an immigrant woman’s tale of endurance and continue building from these endeavors.

Jasmine’s story is different from Mariana’s because she is a 1.5-generation immigrant who at 19 became a mom but has since moved up the political ladder to work directly with the mayor of Washington, D.C. She wants to “leave a legacy” with the political work that she does and serve as an inspiration, but in her day to day, she follows in the footsteps of her grandmother and mother who have always helped and advocated for their fellow compatriots on a smaller scale.<sup>13</sup> Jasmine remarks:

It would be nice for all of us as Salvadoran women to know our worth and leave a legacy. I want to leave my daughter with a roadmap of what barriers I’ve encountered and how to overcome those obstacles so if I get hit in the head, she doesn’t have to (Jasmine).

Jasmine is embodying a “collective citizenry” that is founded on principles of paying it forward by “leaving footprints” that her compatriots can follow. At the same time, Jasmine’s obstacles relate to her identities as a 1.5-generation immigrant woman and so embodying a “collective citizenry” is a process that captures the [in]visibility of these intersectional experiences as well



as leaves a legacy of community activism. While intersectional identities empower immigrant women to mobilize, they are limited in exerting their leadership. I turn to a discussion of the costs of being an immigrant woman as experienced by my participants.

## The costs

Experiences with sexism and discrimination delineate how intersecting identities matter to the extent that as women and immigrants, oppression is doubly experienced. Consequently, I discuss the costs of being an immigrant woman from the vantage point of how they are seen, treated, and excluded by Salvadoran men and white women. Their intersectional identities are made visible to them when they are “othered” and have to endure unpleasant experiences. And yet, these identities have staying power so that even while being doubly oppressed, they are still at the ready, as “comadres,” to help their compatriots.

### *El machismo*

With Latinos you inevitably experience machismo and it's quite surprising because these allies are supposed to be educated...especially with Salvadoran men, they think they can be the best leaders and talk for and over women, that they can make the best decisions, that they can better organize, and sadly, this affects community work.

In the above quote, Yvette, a restaurant owner who enjoys fundraising for children's causes and supports single moms, highlights machismo as an obstacle that women activists have to break. Given what I highlighted before about these women's endurance, it was not a surprise when most of the women I interviewed preferred to discuss their successes when asked about the obstacles they face. Nevertheless, among a few women like Yvette, machismo emerged as an overwhelming theme. Salvadoran women recalled facing machismo in the organizing arena and talked about how it created separate and unequal spheres for men and women so that the “public” work of being an activist was largely male-dominated. Yanny, a government official working in the Salvadoran embassy, says:

Machismo is everywhere because we can't look at women as the fighters if we perceive that it's the men who fight in the streets to defend rights. Women are forced to stay at home, taking care of their kids, making tortillas. Even still, we were not allowed to work and leave our houses. That's why, thank God, I'm single (Yanny).

As Yanny claims, machismo impedes women from going to the streets to fight because that is seen as men's terrain, so it becomes hard for women to even be conceived as leaders since their presumed domain is the home. Yanny witnesses this first-hand because her “work” space is often used for community meetings and when there are more men in attendance, they often lead the conversations. In contrast, Lina, a case manager for a nonprofit in the D.C. metro area, seems to not point fingers to the men themselves, instead choosing to focus on how gender is structured:

The machismo is very obvious, and the paternalism is entrenched because they think they are the only ones who can do certain things, but society is what created these ideas about men being stronger and having more rights (Lina).

Lina's critique of machismo highlights the role society plays in justifying it and perpetuating it.

While the theme of machismo appeared in other works on Salvadorans (Shayne, 1999), I found, through my previous work on Salvadoran's political activism in D.C., that there are different types of Salvadoran male activists ranging from the very politically active ones to the cultural ambassadors to the passive observers. I also witnessed many events that took place in the “Salvadoran spaces” (i.e. restaurants, cultural center, embassy/consular offices, churches), where the men were the majority of the participants. I contrasted this with the mostly “white”

spaces (i.e. nonprofit meeting rooms, government offices, and coffee houses) where the Salvadoran men were the minority and so these experiences inform my ability to see machismo within the lens of intersectionality (Cranford, 2007). I saw that—as immigrants, Salvadoran, and men—they too faced experiences of being [in]visible in the organizing spaces. Whereas they would put on a show in the mostly “Salvadoran” spaces, they were silent in the “white” spaces, and in some instances, were silenced because they could not articulate English words or talk as fast as the native speakers. This opportunity helped me reflect on how machismo might be operating to mark men’s status differently in “white” spaces versus “Salvadoran” ones and this was to the detriment of Salvadoran immigrant women. Indeed, intersectionality helps one see how power is relative and can be used to define one’s positionality vis-à-vis the dominant group as well as the subjugated one. I am in no way suggesting that machismo does not permeate these spaces. Instead, I want to raise the issue that machismo is active and possible because it *is* normalized by the U.S. racist/patriarchal structure—one that allows men to lead and speak over women—but also one that is racialized and gives more authority to white women over Latino men. This makes machismo relational, in the sense that it is a source of power directed toward immigrant women amidst a weak structural position in society when compared to whites.

One of the prevailing concepts that was used by my participants is the notion of *protagonismo* in defining men’s leadership style. The women saw that because of *protagonismo*, or being the center of activist work, Salvadoran men appeared like they were more important than the cause. Women like Jenny saw *protagonismo* as problematic because while it kept Salvadoran women out of the limelight, Jenny argues that “men don’t have the balls” and “when push comes to shove, women have the emotional experience and intellectual capacities to be better leaders whereas men do not speak up even when they are expected to do so.” In this way, Jenny feels that even when men are leaders, it is women’s skills that make them more effective at leading. Women separated themselves from men’s *protagonismo* style by “remaining humble.” And yet, I contend that embodying *protagonismo* might be a response that they employ as immigrant men. In effect, it might be a cover given that they “do not speak up” when they have to. Indeed, the experiences that women relate about men talking over them are not altogether different from the experiences they encounter with white women. But, the prevailing differences lie in the social positioning that reify the intersecting identities, leading Salvadoran women to be doubly marginalized by the men in their group and by the women outside of it.

### **Feeling like a foreigner**

Yvette witnessed the community go through many transitions since migrating to the area in the early eighties. As a self-described “hacelo todo” (doer of all) she has been involved in the political front (i.e. the Solidarity movement<sup>14</sup>), organized the Latino festival, and, when I interviewed her, she was involved in marketing research to help uplift the Latinx image in mainstream media. Because of her prior knowledge of the community, she is constantly being asked to participate in community efforts. When I asked her what obstacles she faced, Yvette recalls one where she was discriminated by white women:

I went and sat down next to the white women but at first, I felt like they were staring at me and asking themselves what is she doing here when she should be cleaning my house. Of course, you have to dress the part and I did, but even then, I felt a complete dismissal on their part and the whole table is filled with white women, with a few African Americans, and I am the only Latina. So, you know I have to do a lot of work to gain their trust because after all, discrimination will always be there, and in my case, I have an accent (Yvette).

Yvette shares an experience of being the only immigrant Latina in the room and having to “work” to gain white women’s trust. Additionally, her commentary about cleaning houses connects her to the employment niche that Salvadoran immigrant women are “known” to occupy in the area. According to Repak (1995), the majority of Salvadoran women who entered the Washington, D.C. workforce, regardless of their human capital skills, worked at one point as

domestics, and so this stereotype might still prevail and affect how Yvette perceives white women view her. I did not interview Salvadoran domestics but still heard my participants' say, "creen que somos sus choleras" (they think that we are their maids) when referring to how mainstream society saw them. These perceptions certainly augmented the "feeling of a foreigner" and normalized the "othering" that led them to experience discrimination regardless of how long they have resided in the area.

Alba, one of the youngest participants in my study and a 1.5-generation immigrant, works in local politics and meets regularly with white women as she spearheads several feminist agendas. She also mentioned discrimination as an obstacle in her activist path:

This industry does not have a significant minority presence, especially of Latinas, and so it's been one of the few times where I felt like a foreigner, I felt a little bit like a foreigner, and that usually doesn't happen. I mean going to the school where I went, I've gone to private schools...I went to, you know, a recognized university and never felt that way (Alba).

The "feeling of a foreigner" is an important cost showing immigrant women how a shared gender identity does not necessarily translate to allyship. Indeed, this "feeling like a foreigner" speaks to the intentional ways that white privilege is enacted when women of color sit at the table whereby white women assume a leadership role over and above women of color. Moreover, my interviewees heard discriminatory remarks when they had an accent or were not English fluent that helped accentuate the "feeling of a foreigner" in the presence of white women. Some remarked that in the "white" organizing spaces, they were the "only Latina" and this was enough to stand out. These cumulative experiences pushed women into being "invisible leaders" who serve their community but steer away from leading immigrant-based coalitions or feminist initiatives. Despite their best intentions, their identities do not necessarily cross over to guarantee allies and gain support.

## **Forms of resistance**

### ***Being humble***

In this section, I will describe some of the tools that Salvadoran women use to dismantle oppressive mechanisms. Similar to Bobel (2007), who discusses humility as a highly esteemed value of a "true" activist because the activist is committed, selfless, sacrificing, and devoted, I argue, my interviewees used humility to better connect with the community and to assert their leadership style. The women below describe it as a skill set:

Since I work in the health field and render services like preventive care and support for HIV-positive folks, I've learned that you have to offer culturally competent resources to our people especially since many of them have low levels of education. So, to impact them, we have to be at their level and render services with humility (Renata)

What I think I bring to the table is that I come from a humble family background. My father was a dishwasher and so I know what it feels to not have enough food. My mom doesn't know how to read and write so I can identify with people who don't have a place to live or food on their table. I went through similar experiences so I can say to our people, I've been through it too (Jasmine)

Women, like Renata, learned to capitalize on humility to better serve the population and "meet them at their level."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Jasmine can relate to the struggles because of shared family experiences. In my observations, humility was deployed in social service settings to refer to clients as "niña" (Miss). At the consulate office, the term "oficio" (occupation) was used and the rationale was that this allowed housewives to include their unpaid labor. In organizing meetings, everyone was a "compañera" (sister in solidarity). Humility helps them listen to the needs and concerns of the community members rather than talk over them or for them. Humility as a skill-set not only influenced the day to day interactions but was also part of the disposition that activists had about themselves when they framed their leadership style.

### *No, I'm not a leader because I rather nurture activists*

Most of the women did not adopt the “leader” label unless community members gave it to them. I contend the reason for this is related to “being a humble leader,” that is, downplaying their role helps push the community to center-stage. Similarly, humility is embraced so that nurturing future activists is better than being leaders. Humility became part of their leadership toolkit to craft a different leadership style from their male and white women counterparts. In effect, their experiences with Salvadoran men led them to resist protagonismo and adopt a style of their “own” that was less self-centered. Similarly, their experiences with white women looking down on them made them feel the need to “uplift” their community into being their own leaders. However, I argue that there are limitations with being a “humble leader” in the sense that these feelings trap women in a double bind because they end up adopting gendered norms like mothering and nurturing that put them in a secondary place relative to Salvadoran men and white women. Their “active passivity” is a way to actively resist “isms” by creating their own form of leadership but also reflects the inherent sexism and racism encapsulating the organizing domains.

### Discussion

In order to underscore the agentic lives of Salvadoran women in the D.C. metro area, I use an intersectional lens to show how they experience power, conflict, and resistance. Their source of power is the community and one they can fearlessly fight for, as mothers would, in a nurturing way that will guide Salvadorans to follow in their footsteps. In effect, they stand out as leaders because whatever they do, they do it with humility and do not expect to be recognized, but rather be in the background so their compatriots can lead the way. However, their “invisibility” as leaders is a strength but one that has been adapted to face the double-bind of being an immigrant woman in the midst of sexism and racism. Indeed, the conflicts they face come from Salvadoran men and white women who want them to “stay in their place.” In turn, Salvadoran women find ways to become the “invisible” leaders and serve as “comadres”—they use their humility to resist, they nurture their compatriots to exist, and most importantly, as a “comadre,” they remain committed until the end.

### Notes

1. Broadly construed, the term is derogatory because it notes the sexism, patriarchy, and powerful mechanisms that men use against women, and so in this way, it is a form of toxic masculinity. It is considered a Latin American “issue” that then extends to the host societies. For instance, in Canada, scholars discuss machismo as creating a role conflict between traditional and egalitarian roles that men and women enact as refugees settling in a new society (Pottie et al., 2005).
2. This term applies to women who will suffer and conform to domestic roles and thereby reify innocence, complacency, and virtue. For example, Mirna Carranza (2013) discusses marianismo in a Canadian context wherein chastity, obedience, and respect were being (re)negotiated in Salvadoran families.
3. See <https://iir.gmu.edu/immigrant-stories/el-salvador/el-salvador-salvadoran-population-in-the-washington-dc-and-baltimore-md-metro-areas>
4. Here I am using the term “comadres” intentionally to both signal the underground and on the ground work of women who are outside the public sphere of organizing campaigns but also the historical linkages with activism rooted in El Salvador, such as that of CoMadres, a peasant women’s organization formed during the civil war whose aim at the time was to build accountability for those who had been forcibly disappeared or imprisoned.
5. Cachimbona is part of the Salvadoran vernacular and I often heard it refer to aunts who worked hard and would not take anything from no one. In the research field, I heard it again as an expression of camaraderie that signaled the support for women who are fighters, strong-willed, and resist oppressions. It is similar to other terms like “luchadoras” but I wanted to make use of the Salvadoran term to give voice and meaning to the Salvadoran women’s story.
6. In Canada, the Sanctuary movement was found to be more localized, not sustained solely by churches, and less in scope compared to the U.S. because Canada’s policy towards refugees in the early 1980s was far

more liberal and open than the U.S.'s immigration laws (Lippert, 2005). In recent years, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and Hamilton, have declared themselves as “sanctuary cities” to combat agendas that increase the precarity of living undocumented lives (Moffette & Ridgley, 2018).

7. It has since moved to Silver Spring as the area gentrified and there were already problems brewing when I conducted my fieldwork related to public order complaints and the limited space meant that people waited outside to get their documents processed.
8. I use the metro area to discuss not just Washington, D.C. but also Maryland and Virginia following the U.S. Census designation. The relative proximity of these areas means that people can travel from one state to another in the same day using public transportation or cars to work and/or leisure.
9. Please see [Appendix I](#) for more information on each participant.
10. At the time, I did not apply for a Certificate of Confidentiality or verbal informed consent so I did not ask about legal status but I assumed that for those who have been residents of the area for close to 19 years, they have some permanent status.
11. These can range from fundraising, testifying, organizing, attending meetings, etc.
12. A longstanding organization in El Salvador aiming to raise consciousness and demand government accountability on gender inequities.
13. Such as feeding the hungry, sharing information, donating to causes, etc.
14. According to Perla (2008), participants of the Solidarity movement joined together to challenge U.S. military intervention and aid in El Salvador as well as support the rebels in El Salvador so they would not lose to the Salvadoran military forces. At the very least, they hoped to push for a peace treaty, reinstate a more democratic political process, and shut down the Salvadoran oligarchy who controlled most of the wealth.
15. I think the myth of the uneducated Salvadoran is one that prevails even in other places, like New York, where I am currently doing another research project.
16. S=Single, M=Married, D=Divorced
17. Non-profit=NP, Government=G, Self-employed=S, Other
18. M=Maryland, V=Virginia

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## Appendix I: Demographic profile of participants

Name	Age	Marital Status <sup>16</sup>	Occupation <sup>17</sup>	Income	Education	Residency Years	Residency Area <sup>18</sup>
Alba	26	S	NP	\$50–75k	B.A.	21	D.C.
Betty	52	S	S	\$50–75k	Associates	40	D.C.
Yvette	50	M	S	\$100k	Some graduate school	30	D.C.
Jenny	63	M	NP	\$75–100k	Ph.D.	25	D.C.
Lina	50	M	NP	\$50–75k	2 yrs of college	14	D.C.
Amber	53	S	NP	\$15–25k	GED	6	D.C.
Iris	45	M	NP	\$50–75k	B.A.	23	D.C.
Yanny	47	S	G	\$15–25k	High School	17	D.C.
Jasmine	34	D	G	\$50–75k	GED	22	D.C.
Connie	55	S	S	\$50–75k	High School	30	M
Ceci	50	S	G	\$15–25k	Masters	3	M
Mariana	55	M	S	\$35–50k	n/a	23	M
Ada	30	S	O	\$35–50k	B.A.	3	M
Renata	50	M	NP	\$50–75k	3 years of college	20	M
Rosita	53	M	S	\$50–75k	Less than high school	33	M
Edel	45	Divorced	S	\$50–75k	Professional license	20	M
Rosaura	61	Married	G	\$35–50k	Associates	5	M
Miriam	43	Married	G	\$35–50k	Associates	21	V
Diana	47	Single	NP	\$35–50k	B.A.	11	V
Doris	43	Married	S	\$100k	7th Grade	22	V