

Los hombres no mandan aqui: Narrating Immigrant Genders and Sexualities in New York

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“Los hombres no mandan aquí”

NARRATING IMMIGRANT GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES IN NEW YORK

El me decía [en Guatemala], “Yo ya tengo hambre” o “Tráeme un fresco.” Se lo tenía que llevar hasta donde estaba él. En cambio ahora no. A él le digo yo, “Mira, yo quiero iced tea.” “Si, ya te lo preparo,” y él se pone hacerlo.

[He would say to me (in Guatemala), “I am hungry” or “Bring me a drink.” I had to bring it to him. Now it is not like that. I say to him, “Hey, I’d like iced tea.” “Yes, I’ll make it for you,” and he starts to make it.]

—Forty-five-year-old woman from Ciudad Guatemala, Guatemala, interviewed in Mt. Kisco, NY

**Carlos Ulises
Decena, Michele
G. Shedlin, and
Angela Martínez**

¿Cómo cambia el papel del hombre cuando viene a este país? Se hace sumiso a la mujer. Por lo menos obedece uno. Dice la mujer: “Vamos a trabajar juntos.” Trabajamos juntos. “Te toca cuidar los niños, hacerles de comer, o ir a traerlos a la escuela.” Se pone uno al nivel de la mujer. Como ella tiene la ley a su favor, eso cambia a uno de ser machista a un poco sumiso, casi hasta “mandilón.” Lo que nos digan tratamos de hacerlo.

[*How does man’s role change when he comes to this country?* He becomes submissive to women. At least one obeys. The woman says, “Let’s work together.” We work together. “It’s your turn to take care of the kids, cook for them, or take them to school.” You are at the same level as a woman. Since the law is in her favor, that changes a person a lot from being a *machista* to being a little submissive, almost *mandilón* (man who lets women order him around). Whatever they say, we try to do.]

—Thirty-two-year-old man from Puebla, Mexico, interviewed in White Plains

Allusions to the autonomy and power some women acquired in immigrant communities surfaced frequently in our research with Latin American immigrants living in urban, suburban, and semirural locations in or near New York City.¹ In informal exchanges, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, many women and men from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico described changes in gender roles and expectations favorable to women. This is consistent with the existing literature.² However, the various meanings given to the words *libertad* and *liberal* (liberty/freedom/free/independence) referring

to women's reported ability to *mandar* (order/command) their male partners and men's *sumisión* (submission) to women's control should not be taken literally. The multiple meanings of these words illuminate existing and emerging contradictions in the politics of gender and sexuality in immigrant communities.

Recent scholarship has documented the centrality of sexuality to the "structuring of gender inequality" in immigrant lives.³ As Gloria González-López posits in the groundbreaking *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives*, "immigrants experience an imaginary transition from tradition to modernity, from rigidity to flexibility."⁴ She illustrates the complexities of Mexican immigrants' understanding of sexuality and gender, eschewing stereotypical portrayals of these populations. Our analysis complements this work by examining the ways immigrants *narrate* their experiences of the changing location of women's and men's labor, domestic violence, and the control of immigrant women's bodies. While descriptions of the "traditionalism" of sending regions and the "modernity" of receiving regions may be accurate, the narratives emerging from these data depict gender and sexual hierarchies in sending regions as static, obscuring the ways in which men and women contest these hierarchies in daily life. Furthermore, perceptions of sex and gender relations as contentious in immigrant communities tend to emphasize women's growing erotic agency while masking the articulation of gender and sexual hierarchies in the United States. To the degree that policymakers, activists, and service providers do not contextualize what immigrants say about sex and gender in the contradictions of immigrant daily struggles, the solutions proposed may become part of the problem.

This analysis draws from the NIH-R01 research titled *New Hispanic Communities and HIV Risk* (M. Shedlin, principal investigator). The research involved Hispanic immigrants living in the United States for three years or less and residing in urban, suburban, and semirural regions in the New York Metropolitan Area.⁵ The study utilized a qualitative approach that included: (1) semistructured, in-depth interviews with participants from the target populations; (2) focus groups with members of the target populations; (3) interviews and focus groups with key informants; and (4) ethnographic observation. Eligibility criteria for the study included: eighteen years of age or older; self-report as Dominican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, or Mexican; residence in the United States for three years or less; and residence in the study areas.

A total of one hundred individual interviews and twenty-four focus groups (with a total of 201 respondents) were conducted. Focus groups were organized by nationality, sex, and site. Two focus groups and forty

key informant interviews with professionals in health and social services were also conducted. The average age of male and female respondents was thirty-three; no differences were found in the average age of participants by sex. Education averaged between fifth and sixth grade of elementary school; most immigrants had only partial elementary education. Approximately half of all of the men and women interviewed were currently married or partnered, with women more likely to be partnered or married (64 percent) than men (41 percent). Generally, male immigrants had migrated alone. Most of the women migrated with their male partners and/or children, or joined partners already settled in New York. Mexican immigrants were present in all locations (urban, suburban, and semirural). Dominicans were more concentrated in urban and suburban areas and Central American participants were more visible in small towns and semirural locations. Of the Central American participants, Guatemalans appeared visible throughout all of the study sites while the number of Hondurans appeared limited.

Some limitations for the analysis undertaken here need to be highlighted. We do not generalize about all members of these immigrant groups or to specific nationalities and ethnicities because of our small and non-representative samples. Although the team attempted to cover a range of sociodemographic characteristics throughout the research sites, participants were contacted mainly through the religious, health, and social service organizations that supported the study. While carrying out fieldwork, we learned that many immigrants did not contact local institutions out of fear of immigration authorities. Especially among women who did not work or who did not have children, isolation from local resources was reported to be common. The team contacted some of the more isolated women through intensive outreach efforts. However, the number of these participants was small.

Libertad and Labor

Libertad had specific meanings for women, and this word surfaced in association with the perception of changes in their roles in the labor force. Women were more likely to be wage earners outside of the household in immigrant communities,⁶ which many informants perceived to encourage shifts in household dynamics.⁷ Many participants stressed the connection between women producing an income outside of the domestic sphere and *libertad* as: (1) being outside the norm; (2) becoming self-sufficient; and (3) becoming economic decision makers.

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The frequency with which informants stressed women's newfound "freedom" as economic providers masked immigrant women's living conditions. Many women interviewed were, in fact, unemployed at the time of their participation in the study. Moreover, available work was generally temporary and restricted during the winter months for both men and women. Unlike men, who stood in groups in public spaces to seek employment, women frequently used informal networks to obtain work. More often than not, women sought out potential employers individually, which tended to limit their ability to negotiate fair wages for their labor. In addition, although abuses by employers were common among the men and women interviewed, only women reported sexual harassment and/or rape at work.

While descriptions of women's postmigration experiences emphasized their departure from the domestic sphere, narratives of "submissive" or "passive" men pointed to men's integration in the domestic division of labor. For many Central American and Mexican men accustomed to having mothers, sisters, or wives/partners cater to their needs, taking care of household duties as men alone or as partners of working women challenged their ideals of masculinity. In all-male households, participants took turns cleaning spaces of collective use, but each man was responsible for washing his own clothes. Many men bought take-out food. Others acquired cooking skills in their jobs in restaurants and cooked for themselves. As a thirty-year-old man from Guatemala living in Riverhead explained when asked if taking care of himself after migration made a difference in how he thought about the domestic division of labor: "Mucha diferencia, porque cuando está en la casa, todo es la esposa, pero acá es uno el que hace todas las cosas. Aquí si uno no hace nada pues se muere de hambre." (It makes a big difference because when you are at home, the wife does everything, but here one has to do everything. Here, if you do not do anything, you die of hunger.) This participant suggested that men took on household duties because they were not "home" (figured as "homeland" with a "wife" in it), because the wife was absent, and because doing "nothing" (here he collapsed washing and ironing clothes, cleaning after oneself, and cooking, among other duties) would make men "die of hunger."

In the case of some Dominicans, resistance to performing household duties after migration was associated with the presence of the female partner. The twenty-five-year-old Dominican woman living in Ossining and quoted below reported that her husband was adamant in his refusal to perform chores he called "women's work."

Él es bien tranquilo. Lo único es que no le gusta hacer de nada. Yo le digo: "Mi amor, pero por favor ayúdame a quitar los regueros, a fregar, a hacer algo." "No, no, no. Yo no soy mujer," dice.

¿Así dice?

Que él no tiene que hacer nada en la casa. Que para eso él sale a la calle a trabajar.

¡Pero usted sale también!

Sí. Yo le digo a él que mi trabajo es doble porque “Yo tengo que salir a la calle a trabajar y también tengo que venir a la casa a fregar, a limpiar a lavar, a atenderte a ti. ¿Por qué tú no me puedes ayudar?” Y él dice: “No, no, no. Yo no soy mujer.” Y la mayoría de los dominicanos son así . . . La mayoría son demasiado machistas.

[He is very quiet. The only thing is that he does not like to do anything. I tell him: “Honey, please help me clean up the mess, wash the dishes, something.” “No, no, no. I am not a woman,” he says.

He says that?

That he does not have to do anything in the house. That is why he goes out to work.

But you also leave the house to go work!

Yes. I tell him my job is double because “I have to go out to work and also have to come back home to wash dishes, clean, wash clothes, to take care of you. Why can’t you help me?” And he says: “No, no, no. I am not a woman.” And the majority of Dominican men are like that . . . The majority are too *machista*.]

Other women complained frequently about their male partners, and discussions of machismo were not exclusive to Dominican women. However, resistance to sharing in domestic duties by Dominican men may also be attributed to the presence of women within these older transnational networks and living arrangements. Continuity in the presence of Dominican women in immigrant households appeared to be a significant factor in the retention of the perception that cleaning, washing dishes, and taking care of children were “women’s work.”

Was there a fundamental change in men’s views of women? The epigraph by the thirty-two-year-old man from Puebla, Mexico, suggested that although men placed themselves “at women’s level,” the speaker continued to believe that men and women were not equals in society. Men’s descriptions of postmigration changes in their relations with women did not suggest a radical change in men’s attitudes. In some cases, men saw these changes as temporary. A woman from Mexico interviewed in East Harlem, for instance, said that “Mi esposo siempre me dice: ‘Aquí te me pones al tú, por tú. Te crees mucho pero vas a ver ahora que regresemos a México.’” (My husband always says: “Here you and I are at the same level. You think you are worth a lot, but wait until we get back to Mexico.”) Men appeared to tolerate certain shifts in the domestic sphere, but even in their descriptions of these changes, a sense of gender equity was absent.

When confronted with the reality of returning to their home communities, some men indicated that they would make use of their acquired domestic skills, while others stated that they would return to their former roles. When asked about a recent visit he had made to his home village, a twenty-year-old Mixteco man from Guerrero, Mexico, living in Riverhead replied:

Pregúntele que si cuando volvió a México cocinó para su señora.

[Traductor pregunta y obtiene respuesta en Mixteco.] Dice que cuando se fue a México él no cocina solamente.

¿Por qué no cocina en México?

Traductor: La esposa de él. [Traductor pregunta y obtiene respuesta en Mixteco.] Porque allá es la casa de uno y la mujer es el deber de ellas cocinar y lavar la ropa. Ellas hacen los quehaceres de la casa. Aunque él sabe [cocinar] pero no hacía nada.

Ask him if he cooked for his wife when he returned to Mexico.

(The translator asks and obtains a response in Mixteco.) He says that when he's gone to Mexico, he does not cook.

Why doesn't he cook in Mexico?

Translator: His wife. (The translator asks and obtains a response in Mixteco.) Because over there is one's house and the woman, it's her duty to cook and wash clothes. They do the domestic tasks. Even though he knows (how to cook) but he didn't do anything.]

A suggestive expression, “allá es la casa de uno” (there is one's house), illustrates the ways in which masculinity was framed as *possession of place* in relation to the migratory process. It is also suggestive of an agreement between the informant and the translator (both of whom were Mixteco) that the translator presented the information as if it were his own opinion. “A wife's duty is to cook and wash clothes” in a context where men claimed possession of the domestic sphere—and her, by implication—while that was not the case after migration. Narratives of immigrant men's engaging in so-called women's labor in the receiving society, or of their passivity before women's will in immigrant communities, coexisted with descriptions of return as repossession of male privilege as well as narratives of the inability of the immigrant experience to change men's views of themselves as men.⁸

Claims that women became liberated economic providers in immigrant households were in some cases anchored in a fallacious distinction between the work performed within households and outside of them. The descriptions invoked to distinguish women as wage laborers *outside of the household* from women as workers in their own households denied that house chores were labor and framed the “rural” sending region as

organized around men's work in agriculture and women's unpaid labor in the domestic sphere. These descriptions also discounted temporary and/or permanent forms of labor women engaged in to complement the income of their male partners (e.g., subsistence agriculture, trade, cooking, etc.). Depictions of women's empowerment in receiving regions as wage earners outside of the household emerged despite the temporary and insecure nature of the employment they secured. Work may have been available for women, but that did not mean that they worked. Even when women worked, many of them continued to be in situations where they were responsible for household chores. And even when men partook of domestic duties, many of them saw having to wash dishes and cook as temporary postmigration burdens.

Domestic Violence and Fear of Deportation

Male participants linked women's independence and autonomy after migration to legal protections from domestic violence. In a telling example, a thirty-two-year-old man from Puebla, Mexico, living in White Plains suggested that migration drastically changed women's social position and access to rights:

Aquí las mujeres están muy liberadas. Aquí es donde la mujer también toma los mismos derechos del hombre, de igual, valemos iguales; incluso, mas ella. Porque las mismas leyes la amparan. Un hombre no puede golpear a una mujer, no le puede gritar, no le puede decir que no haga esto, que no haga aquello porque ya tiene problemas con la ley. Siempre son tratadas bien. Tienen los mejores niveles que un hombre, entonces, sí, es mejor ella.
[Women are freer here. Here is where woman also adopts the same rights as man, of equals, we are worth the same; or she is worth more. Because the laws protect a woman. A man cannot beat a woman, cannot yell at her, cannot tell her do not do this or do not do that because he will already be in trouble with the law. They (women) are always treated well. They have better standards than men so then, yes, she is better off.]

Like other male informants, this participant observed that opportunities for women in immigrant communities appeared linked to protections from domestic violence. The fact that authorities might intervene with negative consequences for the husband/male partner was a challenge to male authority and supported women's sense of protection. However, the suggestion that men and women may be achieving equal footing with each other in their communities was qualified by this participant, who stated that women attained power because they were valued *over* men in the

United States. Narratives of immigrant men's mandatory "submission" to the rule of law in the United States reproduced images of backward sending nations mired in anarchic structures that did not temper aggressive or even violent masculinities. But they also obscured the ways in which the visibility of male immigrant bodies and the increased policing in both public and private affected men's behavior in the United States and made these bodies legible as problematic while other male bodies (namely but not exclusively those of Anglo males) moved with facility and were often the enforcers (as policemen, for instance) of the rule of law.

The situation of day laborers provides an example of the policing of immigrant males in public throughout our research sites. Immigrant men socialized and found work by hanging out on the streets, which became disturbing to local residents in suburban and semirural areas. Solutions to the issue of immigrant day labor had been proposed for these towns as well as in other areas of the country and included shape-up sites, designating specific corners for day labor, and so forth.⁹ But immigrant men reported feeling the hostility of the locals. Consequently, they formed smaller groups while they waited for work so as not to appear threatening. They avoided clustering in large groups near the entrance to stores and approached cars in small groups to avoid being perceived as too aggressive by potential employers, who tended to be Anglo men. Their narratives of passive or submissive men included behavioral modifications made in order to avoid hostilities, modifications that also helped them secure employment by negotiating hierarchical relationships to Anglo men. In other words, immigrant men's passivity in receiving contexts responded to survival imperatives that served to reinforce the sense of entitlement, mobility, and power of their employers.

Informants referred to the awareness men and women had that the latter had access to domestic violence services. Whether women actually used these services or not was a point of disagreement among informants and service providers. Women's fear of having their partners deported as a result of denouncing the violence was a challenge obscured by the emphasis on the system's support of women. Moreover, whatever empowerment such institutional spaces provided immigrant women also reproduced traditional notions of what it meant to be a woman. Other than prenatal and limited pediatric care for children, nonemergency health and social services were not readily available to women as individuals. Rather, their very access to the system was as victims of domestic violence (neglecting the possibility that men may be the victims of violence and/or abuse) and as mothers or as future mothers. Thus, access to services rendered invisible single women and women without children.

Men's dispossession in relation to state structures, often cast by men and women as loss of phallic power in immigrant communities, was reinforced by knowing that while women had some access to "the system," men had little or no access. Nonemergency health services available to immigrant men were largely absent throughout the research sites. However, when they were available at all to men, it was for the management of conditions such as HIV/AIDS. Once they became HIV positive, the medicalization of these men's lives fell under the purview of the state.

In light of the perceived invalidation of immigrant masculinities in the receiving contexts, some men resorted to other means of exercising power. Some men were concerned enough with the challenge to male authority represented by the migration of their female partners that they did not bring their wives/partners to the United States. The following exchange during a focus group with Mexican men is revealing in this regard:

Participante 1: Allá en México es muy raro que una mujer meta al hombre a la cárcel. Allá tiene que castigar el hombre siempre.

Participante 2: Es machismo eso.

Participante 1: Pero acá no. ¿Por qué creen que yo no traigo a mi mujer?

(Risas.)

Facilitador: ¿Por eso no la traes?

Participante 1: No, es un poco canija ella.

Facilitador: ¿Los otros hombres casados tampoco la traen?

Varios participantes: No.

[Participant 1: There in Mexico, it is rare for a woman to put a man in jail. There men always punish.

Participant 2: That is machismo.

Participant 1: But not here. Why do you think I do not bring my wife?

(They laugh.)

Facilitator: That's why you don't bring her?

Participant 1: No, she is a little stubborn.

Facilitator: The other married men do not bring them either?

Various participants: No.]

A comparative transnational perspective sheds some light on why Mexican men might not have been as willing as Dominican men, for example, to facilitate the migration of their female partners. While the man who refused to bring his wife to the United States and the other focus group participants, even if they lived in urban areas, had probably been the first to migrate in their families and may have had relatively few kin-based resources, Dominican men were as likely as were their female partners to be the first to migrate to the United States.¹⁰ After migration, the

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relatively denser structure of existing networks for Dominicans offered opportunities to women while exerting greater force in the retention of traditional household dynamics. Unlike some of the Mexican and Central American men, Dominican men did not need to keep their partners in the sending areas out of fear of a drastic change in their relationships. Furthermore, Dominican men were more likely to be documented than Mexicans and Central Americans, making fear of deportation less of an obstacle for the retention of gender dynamics.

Men's vulnerability to domestic violence may be acknowledged informally, but access to these services led to the belief that women were the only ones who dealt with this problem. Finally, the assertion that state structures protected women in receiving locations masked the ways in which an undocumented status became an immediate disincentive to report domestic violence. In other words, instead of being empowered, immigrant women had to decide between stopping a partner's abuse/violence and the potential deportation of a male partner. As long as understandings of empowerment and access do not account for the costs of being undocumented and the consequent lack of legal and social legitimacy, the protection of immigrant women will not be achievable.

The Bodies of Women and Respectability

Narratives of the liberation of women through migration emphasized women's growing control over their own bodies and sexualities. Some participants cited the receding importance of communal surveillance mechanisms on women's sexuality in immigrant communities. According to a thirty-four-year-old woman from La Vega, Dominican Republic, living in Washington Heights, this lack of community control shaped how men and women socialized with one another:

Porque allá no es como aquí. En este país la gente se conoce y salen y dizque se juntan. Allá es en distancia. El hombre no se junta con la mujer hasta que no se casa. Por lo menos en mi familia esa costumbre nos dan . . . Yo no salía sola con él a una discoteca a bailar. No, yo iba con una hermana mía.

Ah, te mandaban con una hermana.

Con una hermana. No porque me tuvieran desconfianza a mí, sino para que la gente no dijera: "Mira estos. ¿Serán marido y mujer que andan solos?" Allá no se juntan como aquí, que tienen amores y dizque salen y duermen juntos y llegan al otro día. Allá no se usa eso.

[Over there, it is not like here. In this country, people meet and go out and then get together. Over there is more distance. The man does not get together

with the woman until he marries her. At least in my family that is the custom . . . I would not go out dancing to the disco with him. No, I would go with my sister.

Ah, they let you go out with a sister.

With a sister. Not because they do not trust me but so people would not say: “Look at them walking alone. Are they sleeping together?” Over there people do not hook up like they do over here, where they date, go out, and have sex and show up the next day. That is not the custom over there.]

Participants reported that the ability of men and women to socialize and have sex was due to the absence of mechanisms that would ensure the propriety of such relations. Though fear of gossip traveling transnationally may have deterred some men and women from engaging in improper behaviors, this informant and others suggested that this fear did not deter men and women from socializing and having sex.

Immigrant women’s self-presentation and consumption patterns were focal points of the anxieties articulated around their sexuality. It may be laudable for women to become independent, but some informants frowned upon women who displayed that independence through consumption. As this thirty-year-old man from Santa Ana, El Salvador, and living in Spring Valley noted, clothing signaled self-sufficiency as well as physical and sexual independence:

¿En qué sentido ve usted que la ropa indica que las mujeres son un poquito más liberales?

Tal vez por la forma de vestirse, tal vez puedan darse el lujo que no se daban allá. Aquí están sin sus padres que muchas veces lo mantienen a uno un poco quieto. Allá no se acostumbra mucho la falda corta, ropa muy pegada, o sea, piecitas extravagantes así. En cambio aquí no tienen a nadie quien lo vigile, pues ellas se ponen lo que ellas quieren.

[In what way do you see that clothes indicate that women are a little freer?

Maybe because of the way they are dressed, they may indulge in luxuries they could not over there. Here they are without their parents, who often control one. Short skirts and tight clothes are not the custom there—I mean extravagant little pieces like that. On the other hand, they have nobody to keep an eye on them, so they wear whatever they want.]

The independence this informant described was that of the woman who made her own money and did not have parents or relatives nearby to regulate what she wore in public. Male informants, especially, saw women provocatively dressed as yet another sign of the absence of controls on women’s “morals” in immigrant communities. The ability to choose their clothing signaled women’s control over their own bodies in the public sphere.

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Women may have been appreciative of the liberation they gained through migration, but some were wary of it slipping into sexual *libertinaje* (libertinism). This concern often appeared connected with women's reported facility to go from partner to partner. As a twenty-two-year-old woman from Jutiapa, Guatemala, living in Nyack stated, "Aquí ya la mujeres tienen la costumbre de irse con un hombre, con otro, con otro" (Here women are accustomed to go from one man to another and to another). Women informants, in making generalizations about other women, exempted themselves from the kind of women they criticized. The quote below—drawn from an interview with a forty-two-year-old woman from San Salvador, El Salvador, living in Yonkers—provides more evidence of this:

¿Usted cree que las mujeres se comportan sexualmente de manera distinta aquí que en El Salvador?

Mire, yo me he mantenido siempre la misma, pero he oído que muchas mujeres tienen muchas parejas, con la libertad que hay acá, porque no tienen temor que las vayan a criticar. Eso es lo que he escuchado. A mí no me consta nada, porque yo realmente soy bien dedicada a mis hijos y al trabajo.

[Do you think that women behave sexually in a different way here than they did in El Salvador?]

Look, I have always been the same, but I have heard that many women have many partners, with the freedom there is here, because they do not fear criticism. That is what I have heard. I have not seen anything myself because I am very dedicated to my children and to work.]

The legitimacy of this woman's social location within the immigrant community was produced in the opposition she articulated between women who "have a lot of partners" and herself, a woman dedicated to "kids and to work." It is possible that some women with multiple partners worked and had children, but this participant presented the interviewer with a vision of herself first as a mother and second as a worker. Thus, she located herself symbolically in a domestic sphere void of sex and desire and suggested that her only excursion outside of it was to work. "Liberal," in this case, is clearly not *libertinaje*.

Anxieties related to women's freedoms arose also when women entered spheres usually associated with men and engaged in consumption practices associated with men. These liberties included women's drinking, smoking, and dancing in bars and restaurants. Nevertheless, what appeared most disturbing about women's newfound freedom in immigrant communities was their ability to play the field in romantic/sexual relations in ways similar to men. As this twenty-nine-year-old man from Santo Domingo, Domini-

can Republic, and living in Washington Heights suggested, Dominican women became “players” like men in receiving communities.

La mujer dominicana aquí es peligrosa mano. Se vuelve igual como el hombre. Entonces, ahí si hay problema. Los otros días conocí una persona que se veía que venía en cacería. Y después me la toco en un restaurante con su esposo y sus dos hijos. Me presentó al esposo y a los hijos. . . . Ella podía decir que esa noche ella conoció una persona y que le había gustado para salir. Y el esposo muy inocente sin saber que realmente [ella] ya se había acostado con ese tipo.

[Dominican women are dangerous here, brother. She becomes equal to me. Then, we have a problem. The other day I met someone who looked like she was out on the prowl. And then I bump into her in a restaurant with her husband and her two kids. . . . She could have said that first night she met someone she liked to get together. And the husband was clueless, not knowing that she had slept with the guy.]

What made women *peligrosas* (dangerous), for this informant, was behavior considered to be in the male domain. In the above example, the woman inverted sex and power relations by pursuing extramarital affairs and objectifying men. Thus, the liberality of some women related to the way they stepped out of their position of object of male desire and turned the gaze around. Migration seemed to cause problems because in the United States, women became hunters of men.

Narratives of serious versus dangerous women abounded in our conversations with immigrant men and women and included seeing “American” women as representing the extremes of the dangerous liberation of women’s sexuality. As a thirty-three-year-old woman from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and living in Yonkers explained:

¿Las mujeres americanas son muy diferentes de las mujeres hondureñas?

Sí. Que son muy liberales.

¿Las mujeres americanas? ¿En qué sentido?

Pues, no pasan en sus casas. Se atreven más a las cosas del mundo que a la estima de su propia vida.

¿A qué cosas del mundo ellas se entregan?

No pasan en su casa como nosotros. Los hispanos pasamos en nuestra casa. Al parecer las jóvenes andan en discotecas y las mujeres, pues, andan en la calle.

¿Y usted cree que en cuanto a cuestiones sexuales las mujeres son diferentes en Estados Unidos y en Honduras?

Pues digamos que sí, porque el americano tiene unas enseñanzas para ellos más avanzada, como que ellos miran mucha pornografía porque ellos no pasan haciendo nada, perdón, algunos, ¿verdad?

What appeared
most disturbing
about women’s
newfound
freedom in
immigrant
communities was
their ability to
play the field in
romantic/sexual
relations in ways
similar to men.

[American women, are they very different from women from Honduras?]

Yes. They do not spend time at home. They are attracted to worldly things more than caring for their own lives.

American women? In what sense?

Well, they are not at home. They like things of the world more than their own lives.

What kind of worldly things?

They do not spend time at home like us. We, Hispanics, stay at home. It appears that the young ones are in the discos and the women, well, they are out on the street.

And do you think that regarding sexual things, women are different in the United States and Honduras?

Well, let's say yes, because Americans have learned more advanced things, like the fact that they look at a lot of pornography because they don't spend time doing much of anything—sorry, some of them, right?]

While this informant recognized the freedoms American women enjoyed as part of the more advanced education they supposedly had, hers was not a laudatory characterization of American women's sexuality (or educations). The target of these characterizations implicitly tended to be white U.S. women. Nevertheless, when immigrant men and women made such remarks, they were often concerned with Americanization imagined as moral decay. In this sense, then, lazy non-Latinas exemplified the dangers of becoming a woman of the street, the kind of woman who would be seen as deviant in immigrant communities. The alternatives formulated to this dissolute Americanized womanhood were Hispanic women, who spent their time at home. The figuration of home and street was explicitly sexualized, for the street became the realm where women indulged in worldly things. The allusion to pornography was not coincidental, as it linked deviant sexuality with consumption. The home, by contrast, was rendered as a space void of sex. In discussing a similar way of representing American women as deviant in contrast to Filipina women's virtue among the women she interviewed, Yen Le Espiritu suggests that "racialized groups . . . castigate the morality of white women as a strategy of resistance—a means to assert a morally superior public face to the dominant society."¹¹ In the case of Filipina as well as Hispanic women, there are costs to this way of depicting difference between ethnic immigrant and white women. "The elevation of Filipina chastity," Le Espiritu continues, "has the effect of reinforcing masculinist and patriarchal power in the name of a greater ideal of national/ethnic self-respect."¹²

The sexual dangers of Americanization made an appearance within immigrant communities as well. The description of Americanization as dangerous for women appeared most starkly in the way some women talked

about young girls and adolescents. A thirty-year-old Dominican woman living in Tarrytown voiced her concerns regarding young women:

¿Cuál crees que sea la diferencia entre la gente de EU y de Republica Dominicana en su comportamiento sexual?

Que este es un país muy liberal.

¿En que sentido?

Mira esas muchachitas como están oyendo música a esta hora. Y hoy es viernes. A esta hora no. Ahora van a ser las dos p.m. A esta hora estuvieran fregando y trapeando allá, porque los papás la obligan. Hasta que ellas no tengan la casa limpia a las cinco de la tarde, ellas no pueden salir al frente. Entonces el país es muy liberal. En ves de ser libertad, es libertinaje.

[What do you think might be the difference in the sexual behavior between people in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic?

That this country is too free.

In what sense?

See those girls, how they are listening to music at this hour. And today is Friday. Not at this hour. It will be two o'clock soon. At this hour, they would be washing dishes and mopping the floors over there because their parents force them. They cannot go out until five in the afternoon until they leave a clean house. So the country is too free. Instead of being free, they become libertines.]

This participant suggested that immigrant parents did not control the behavior of their daughters. Her antidote for indications that daughters of immigrants may have been spending too much time listening to music was to discuss the options young women would have in the homeland: performing household chores. Apart from the suspicious eye cast upon young women's leisure activities, the larger threat inherent in this informant's comment was that these young women would become libertines, the result of *libertad* becoming *libertinaje*. Finally, the quote is suggestive in what it leaves out, for it is possible that what the participant was criticizing was not only that there were young women listening to music but that these young women were in the company of young men while doing so. While this quote points to community vigilance of the behavior of young women, the absence of any concern with the leisure activities of young men points to the ways in which community surveillance disciplines the bodies of young women while normalizing the entitlement of young men to be out on the street, to not share in household chores, and so forth.

It was not only young or second-generation women who were characterized as nonrespectable by other immigrants. While "Americanas" and young women signaled some unacceptable forms of femininity, nationality and racial difference were also prisms through which different forms of

femininity and heterosexuality were constructed. A twenty-one-year-old woman from Progreso in Honduras and living in Yonkers stated the following:

He conocido muchas dominicanas y ellas tienen como una actitud más desarrollada para tener una relación sexual. Cuando vine la esposa de mi hermano y una muchacha amiga de ella, les escuché que decían “mama huevo,” una serie de palabras así.

[I have met many Dominican women and they have a more developed attitude to engage in sexual relations. When I came, my brother’s wife and a friend of hers, I heard them say “cocksucker,” and other words like that.]

This informant’s insights are one example of the characterizations that emerged when immigrant femininities and heterosexualities were seen through the prisms of nationality and race. Just as this informant pointed out, Dominican women (generally mulatto and black) were perceived to be much more provocative sexually and aggressive than Mexican or Guatemalan women (generally mestizo or indigenous), who were perceived to be more conservative. Though these words may capture well how some Central American women perceived Dominican women, conversations with Dominican women suggested that they had more in common with Central American women than those women perceived. Dominican women may have reported that they engaged in a variety of sexual activities that Central American and Mexican women did not report. However, it was not to pursue sexual pleasure for its own sake but, rather, to retain the male partner. In other words, Dominican women may have been more forthcoming than Central American and Mexican women in talking about their sexual practices, though they still framed them within the contexts of relationships with their male partners.

It was in striking contrast that men’s engagement in sexual relations with various partners and their use of sex workers in immigrant communities were mentioned with frequency, but not in connection to moral decay or libertinism. Indeed, the portrayal of these sexual activities tended to normalize them as doing what men do. Thus, narratives of the freedom of women tended to omit and naturalize men’s entitlements to sexual relations with multiple partners as attributes of their gender, even when the construction of these sexual scenarios rendered explicit that immigrant men’s access to certain women’s bodies was structured by their social location in local race, ethnic, and class hierarchies.¹³

Framing women as more sexually autonomous in receiving contexts reinscribed notions of sending regions as having a tighter control over women’s sexuality while obscuring the ways in which mechanisms of community surveillance were also deployed in immigrant communities.

Emerging narratives about Hispanic womanhood reveal an investment in respectable femininities. Women articulated their sense of themselves by distancing themselves from deviant sexualities and by figuring the domestic as an asexual space. The investment in the construction of respectable models of Hispanic womanhood may be a strategy of resistance, but this construction is anchored in a hierarchy of femininities that rewards sexual conservatism and that punishes sexual assertiveness and consumption.

Discussions of the liberation of women and the passivity of men in immigrant communities, although alluding to multiple aspects of immigrant lives, need to be analyzed critically as narratives that function in particular ways. Taking as given that they represent how immigrant men and women experience reality obscures the ways in which these narratives are themselves mechanisms immigrants develop to make sense of their situations. In using these narratives to explain to others what they see, immigrant men and women draw from available portrayals of where they came from, of where they lived, and of who they were. Treating these portrayals uncritically produces research and policy solutions that may appear to remedy ongoing challenges but that, instead, neglect the ideological contexts in which these narratives are embedded. Inadvertently, then, these accounts become complicit in masking the realities they seek to challenge by failing to contextualize what people say in the contradictions of their own daily lives.

Perceptions and realities are not the same thing and realities are mediated by perceptions. However, we have been concerned with showing what immigrants said or did not say when it comes to the politics of gender and sexuality because immigrants' perceptions of their own realities tended to be uncritically incorporated into agendas for activism and social service provision at the local level. In our contact with activists, other researchers, and services providers, we noticed that there was relative consensus around women's empowerment and much silence about men as gendered subjects. Were claims of men's passivity not gendered and sexualized claims also? Further, these perceptions of women's freedom and men's passivity were often treated as neutral windows into realities that were much more complex than they appeared at first glance.

Narratives about sending regions may have some grain of truth in them. However, taking these narratives at face value neglects a consideration of gender and sex as sites of struggle in those sending regions where they are generally imagined as static.¹⁴ Accepting that women's lives are "better" in receiving areas neglects a consideration of the new challenges women face, some of which are partly due to the availability of protections for them. It also neglects a consideration of the ways in which gender and

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power are implicated in men's lives and relations with other men at work, in shape-up sites, and so on. These insights challenge policymakers, activists, and health and social service providers to find alternative ways of empowering both men and women to understand the obstacles they face in their adaptation. Unless we find ways to appreciate the context and function of immigrants' narratives of their own realities, we risk becoming part of the very ills we are trying to alleviate.

Notes

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1. "New Hispanic Communities and HIV Risk" was conducted from January 2003 through May 2005. Additional results of this research study may be found in Carlos Decena and Michele Shedlin, "Defining New Communities: A Challenge for Immigrant Health," *Papeles de Población* 44 (2005). See also Michele Shedlin, Carlos Decena, and Denise Oliver-Velez, "Initial Acculturation and HIV Risk among New Hispanic Immigrants to New York," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 97, special supplement (2005): 32S–37S; and Sherry Deren, Michele Shedlin, Carlos Decena, and Milton Mino, "Research Challenges to the Study of HIV/AIDS among Migrant and Immigrant Populations in the United States," *Journal of Urban Health* 82, supplement 3 (2005): III13–III25.

2. A classic work in this literature is Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Another important work in this literature is Sherry Grassmuck and Patricia Pessar, *Between Two Islands: Dominican International Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Though both of these works and more recent efforts document ruptures and continuities in gender relations, they support the view that women are able to renegotiate gender relations as a result of migration. Recent additions to the literature include Jennifer Hirsch, *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Other useful contemporary perspectives on gender and migration may be found in Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

3. See Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Gender and Immigration: A Retrospective and Introduction," in Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gender and U.S. Immigration*, 15.

4. Gloria González-López, *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

5. Specifically, participants were recruited from the counties of Westchester, Putnam, Rockland, Suffolk, and from the area of northern Manhattan.

6. What appeared to change most noticeably was the perception of the move of women's labor outside of the domestic sphere in receiving contexts. This perception persisted despite the fact that many of the women we interviewed worked before migrating to the United States.

7. In a recent article, Baker suggests that immigrant Mexican women living in Iowa faced "changing material conditions [which] wrested from them their traditional lifestyle and threw them into a situation in which they adapted by maintaining traditional gender ideology while transgressing traditional gender behavior." See P. L. Baker, "'It is the only way I can survive': Gender Paradox among Recent Mexican Immigrants to Iowa," *Sociological Perspectives* 47 (2004): 393–408.

8. Luin Goldring shows, for instance, how hometown associations function to construct a space for male exercise of political power in the homelands after migration. This political response is due, in part, to immigrant men's sense of a loss of status in immigrant communities. See Luin Goldring, "Gender, Status, and the State in Transnational Spaces: The Gendering of Political Participation and Mexican Hometown Associations," in Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gender and U.S. Immigration*, 341–58.

9. In some instances, the community tensions over the presence of immigrant men in public spaces have resulted in violent episodes such as the one in Farmingville discussed in James E. Claffey's piece in this issue.

10. This is consistent with the existing literature on Dominicans. See Grasmuck and Pessar, *Between Two Islands*.

11. Yen Le Espiritu, "'Americans Have a Different Attitude': Family, Sexuality, and Gender in Filipina American Lives," in *Gender through the Prism of Difference*, ed. Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 233.

12. *Ibid.*

13. We concur with Louisa Schein's warning against the use of gender to index sexuality, especially because gender does not always index sex and because sexuality can be deployed to negotiate racial, ethnic, and class differences that a collapse of sexuality into "gender" obscures. Our fieldwork shows, for example, that immigrant men and women view men's hiring of sex workers as a way of dealing with "men's needs." Within that conventionally gendered register, it is inconceivable that women would actually hire male sex workers to satisfy their sexual needs. Moreover, narratives around sex work emerging in our research also suggest that the sex workers many of these men have access to are also immigrant women sent to specific locales from the city or engaging in sex work to supplement their incomes. Central American and Mexican men may have access to these networks of sex work as a way to negotiate their lack of access to spaces for socialization and sexual connection available to Dominicans, for example. Dominican men may hire sex workers as well, but they appeared to do so from positions of relative advantage in contrast to Mexican and Central American men. Finally, descriptions of the bodies of Dominican women as sexually enticing were also strongly related to the

erotics of cross-ethnic/racial/national proximity. See Louisa Schein, “Diaspora Politics, Homeland Erotics, and the Materializing of Memory,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7 (1999): 697–729.

14. The scholarship on gender in Latin America is still wrestling with many of the “master narratives” produced about men and women in the region. See, for instance, Rosario Montoya, Lessie Jo Frazier, and Janise Hurtig, eds., *Gender’s Place: Feminist Anthropologies of Latin America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002) and Jennifer Abbassi and Sheryl L. Lutjens, eds., *Rereading Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Political Economy of Gender* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). A recent example in the scholarship that challenges even the notion that women are completely subject to men’s will in situations of domestic violence comes not from the anthropological but from the historical literature. In *The Secret History of Gender*, Steve J. Stern uses an archive of police records on cases of domestic violence in late colonial Mexico to illustrate the ways in which women often capitalized on their sense of their obligations as women and of their partners’ obligations as men to negotiate violent relationships. The portraits may not offer “freedom” in an uncomplicated way, but they offer a more nuanced perspective of this question. See Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).