

# Latin American Women Lead Migration

by Lucy M. Cohen

The history of the settlement of Salvadorans in Washington dates back to the pre- World War II period, when small communities of Central Americans began to migrate to Washington as well as to other cities, notably San Francisco and New Orleans. Whereas the typical pioneers of past immigration waves have been men, approximately two-thirds of the Latin American newcomers are women. Moreover, they are not young, single persons or widows, who venture on long voyages to the promised land. Rather, many are women with established households in their places of origin, who leave some children behind under the care of maternal relatives. They come in search of improved social and economic conditions and enter the country with immigration documents or as undocumented workers. Others, fearing persecution, seek political asylum.

The migration experience for them is not simply the process of securing proper documents of entry and learning of the English language. It is that and much more. It is a process in which women draw on a cultural world which contains the rich ideologies and traditions characterizing contemporary Latin American societies. Most are Roman Catholics or members of other Christian denominations. Spanish is the native language of the majority except Brazilians, who speak Portuguese, and citizens of the former French and English colonies in the Caribbean. For many, migration involves a history of repeated entries to Washington, an area to which they are attracted by opportunities and the tradition of hospitality associated with it.

Most Latinas are of working-class background from small- and intermediate-sized towns. Many were an active part of "invisible economies," as entrepreneurs in small businesses within their own homes or region of residence. They entered Washington with the goal of working in order to attain higher levels of living for themselves and their families, believing that parents ought to sacrifice themselves for their children. Most men also work full time, and a sizeable proportion hold down "moonlighting" jobs. Men and women tend to work in semi-skilled and unskilled positions as well, but there is greater occupational mobility for men than for women who have probably been previously underemployed in the homeland.

Latinas come highly motivated by the belief that

self-sacrifice is necessary to attain the desired goal of a better life for their children. Separation from home, however, is not the first major life hurdle which these women have faced. They have learned that throughout life there are problems of one kind or another. Success consists of a willingness to face each problem and to overcome it.

Planning for the future and hard work are central values enabling these newcomers to master the challenges of settlement in Washington. The containment of feelings is also important. Through the practice of *controlarse* (control of the self) and *sobreponerse* (to overcome oneself) Latinas cope with stress-inducing situations, particularly those associated with their children and other loved ones. They deal with their situation, contain their feelings, face difficulties and work hard to master them.

The households of these Latinas are flexible units which expand and contract in accordance with the stages of entry and settlement and the life cycle states of family members. Extended households are largely characteristic of mothers who are alone with children and other relatives, particularly sisters, brothers and mothers. Both the nuclear and extended families are sources of mutual help in such tasks as child care, the search for jobs or counseling for problems of illness. The strength of these bonds of reciprocity enables those who are lowest salaried to remain economically independent. For those who have entered as undocumented workers, the active circles of kin, friends and others provide support for the problems of settlement. These networks help them explore the present day possibilities of securing amnesty and permanent residence.

Typically it takes a mother about seven years after an initial entry to the city to bring remaining children to Washington. Latino women view separation from children as a phase necessitated by poverty in the home communities, emergencies associated with unstable political situations and the difficulties in obtaining permission for family groups to enter the United States. The majority of post-1965 immigrants to this country, including the families of Latinas, have entered the country on the basis of family ties to residents already here.

Immigrants and refugee women send regular contributions home to their children and other close family



A Salvadoran mother and child enjoy their popular community festivities in Washington, D.C. Photo by Rick Reinhard

members. Remittances vary from \$50 to more than \$200 a month, often amounting to one-third of their American earnings each month. For Salvadoran women this practice has become institutionalized, as evidenced by the presence of remittance agencies to wire money back to their families within a short time.

As children left behind are brought to Washington to join their mothers and fathers, siblings born here and other kin, they learn new ways and English rapidly. It is not unusual for these youth to become guides, helping parents to translate letters and other documents, care for younger siblings or assume other parental responsi-

bilities in their absence. Thus old and new generations join together to forge new lives and to continue to face the joys as well as the struggles involved in carving new meaning in the rich mosaic of the diverse cultures of our nation's capital.

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*Suggested reading*

Coben, Lucy M. *Culture, Disease and Stress Among Latino Immigrants*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Research Institute on Immigration and Ethnic Studies, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Refugees" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 18 (in press).