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# Empowered Mothering Among Poor Latina Women in Abusive Relationships

*Empowered mothering comes in different forms depending on the individual woman and broader context involved. This brief article examines how in the process of resisting men's violence within and after leaving an abusive relationship, women engage in and expand practices of empowered mothering. More specifically, I provide a general overview of how poverty and intimate violence inform efforts to protect children and practice empowered mothering among two groups of women: Peruvian women who migrated from predominantly rural, indigenous areas of Peru to Peru's largely mestizo capital, Lima, and undocumented Mexican women who migrated to Texas. I suggest that women find ways to exert agency through their mothering practices as a way to protect children and themselves even within the constrictive space of an abusive home and poverty. I also underscore that even after leaving an abusive relationship, racism, poverty, and additional forms of violence may continue to impact women's lives and those of their children. My focus on poor Latinas seeks to enrich our understanding of empowered mothering by exploring its challenges and potential among women whose experiences are not commonly analyzed in the literature on empowered mothering (see O'Reilly 2004, 2006).*

A woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship is a complex process influenced by various factors. For many women, their children's well-being is among the most significant factors in deciding to permanently leave (Hilton, 1992; Hendy et al., 2003). This brief article examines how in the process of resisting men's violence within and after leaving an abusive relationship, women engage in and expand practices of empowered mothering. More specifically, I discuss how poverty and intimate violence inform efforts to protect children and practice empowered mothering among two groups of women: Peruvian women who migrated from predominantly rural, indigenous areas of Peru to

Peru's largely mestizo capital, Lima, and undocumented Mexican women who migrated to Texas in search of better jobs and futures for their families. On the one hand, I suggest that women found ways to exert agency through their mothering practices as a way to protect children and themselves even within the constrictive space of an abusive home and a broader context of poverty. On the other hand, I underscore that even after leaving an abusive partner, racism, poverty, and additional forms of violence continued to impact women's lives and those of their children.

Far from being a unique Latin American phenomenon, men's violence against women crosses national, cultural, social, racial, and economic borders and affects approximately one in three women worldwide (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller, 1999). In this article my focus on poor Latinas in abusive relationships seeks to enrich our understanding of empowered mothering by exploring its challenges and potential among women whose experiences are not commonly analyzed in the literature on empowered mothering (see O'Reilly, 2004, 2006). The first part of the article provides a broad view of empowered mothering in Latin America through a discussion of collective forms of empowered mothering. The second part of the article focuses on individual forms of empowered mothering among women I interviewed.

Data for this essay come from a larger life history project on women's experiences of everyday resistance amidst intimate, institutional, and structural violence in Lima in 2001-2002, as well as during annual follow-up visits up to 2008, and from interviews on migration and domestic violence with undocumented Mexican women in Texas in 2006. In Lima, I interviewed approximately forty women whose ages ranged from 19 to 68 and who had been in abusive relationships anywhere from a few months to 30 years. Each interview lasted between one and three hours and I interviewed each woman between one and three times. I recruited women predominantly through shelters and to a lesser extent through a reproductive health clinic, women's nonprofit organizations, and personal contacts.

In Texas, I interviewed six Mexican women living in the Austin area whose ages ranged from 25 to 46 and who were or had been in abusive intimate relationships from one to six years. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and I interviewed each woman one time. I recruited women through a Catholic Church and a community assistance nonprofit organization. The Mexican women in Texas had lived in the United States between two and nine years. The Peruvian women I interviewed had lived in Lima for a minimum of six years. All of the women in Lima and in Texas are heterosexual, mestiza or indigenous, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. All of the women whose experiences I refer to in this article are mothers.

According to Adrienne Rich, we must differentiate "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control“ (Rich, 1986: 13, cited in O’Reilly, 2006: 11; emphasis in original). While the patriarchal institution of motherhood may be oppressive, the practice of mothering has the potential to be empowering for both mother and child (O’Reilly, 2006). According to Andrea O’Reilly, empowered mothering signifies that “the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy” thus transforming motherhood into “a political site wherein the mother can effect social change” through the ways in which she rears her children and through her own autonomous acts of social justice (2004: 12). In what follows, I discuss some of the collective and individual practices of empowered mothering among Latin American women.

## Collective forms of empowered mothering in Latin America

In North America, research on “mothering as a site of empowerment and social change” has been rare (O’Reilly, 2004: 3) and has focused largely on individual women. In contrast, in Latin America mothering has a long trajectory of being studied and publicly performed as a site of collective resistance and social change. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have since the late 1970s constituted an internationally known group that has challenged the state’s use of violence against its citizens, and particularly the disappearances of its citizens, through its members’ public self-presentation as mothers concerned for the well-being (and therefore, whereabouts) of their disappeared children. Research on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their struggles during the military junta (1976-1983) began to appear in the mid-1980s (for example, John Simpson and Jana Bennett (1985) and continued to flourish during the next two decades (for example, Bouvard, 1994; Fisher, 1999).

In El Salvador in the late 1970s, mothers organized themselves into Co-Madres to locate disappeared children and other family members before and during the civil war (1979-1992), and in the process of protesting human rights abuses also questioned the constrictive gender roles they were expected to perform (Stephen, 1997, 1999). More recently, in Mexico, mothers of disappeared young women—most of whom were *maquiladora* workers and some of whose bodies were later found mutilated, raped, and tortured—in Juarez organized themselves to demand justice from local authorities. As Cynthia Bejarano underscores, “the *madres* (mothers) in each country acted collectively to transfer empowerment from the private sphere of citizenship reserved for mothers to the public sphere of motherist activism” (2002: 126), thereby challenging widespread human rights abuses and asserting their authority and agency to demand justice.

Women in these larger protest movements, as well as the women I interviewed, were influenced by dominant “Latin American cultural constructions of femininity [that] are strongly identified with motherhood, and serving the needs of children and household” (Molyneux, 2006: 438). At the same time, women’s decisions to act collectively as well as individually should not be interpreted as simple extensions of their roles as mothers. Women's actions constitute the self-conscious use of the maternal role as a strategy to assert authority. By asserting agency and authority through their conscious manipulation of their roles as mothers, women are able to demand social change in the hopes of creating a more just world for their children and themselves.

Women have emphasized their role as mothers to create groups similar to those in Argentina, El Salvador, and Mexico and engage in similar collective actions throughout Latin America. In the cases I discuss below, however, women's experiences of violence in the home did not result in collective forms of action. Additionally, while the collective forms of action discussed above were not restricted to poor women, my research on empowered mothering among Peruvian and Mexican women is limited to poor women. Instead of engaging in collective forms of action, women I interviewed engaged in individual protest and empowerment and sought to transfer empowerment from mother to child. Focusing both on collective and individual forms of motherist activism results in a more holistic picture of empowered mothering among Latina women.

## Empowered mothering in Peru

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, approximately half of all Peruvians were classified as poor. For many of the women I interviewed, poverty meant that they were unable to meet their family's basic needs of food and shelter and that, despite constant efforts to find work, the women either did not work or worked but their salary was insufficient to meet the family's basic needs. Additionally, full citizenship in Peru has historically been guaranteed only for the urban, white, and wealthy, and as indigenous and mestiza migrants to Lima, women I interviewed were commonly discriminated against in both public and private venues.

Within this context of poverty and discrimination, and especially of living within or attempting to leave an abusive relationship in a setting in which resources for battered women with which to rebuild their lives are scarce, women agreed that as mothers it was inevitable to make sacrifices. However, they strongly protested against sacrifices their partners imposed on their children. One woman clearly stated this position when she explained that when her husband refused to give her money to meet their children's needs (which her own salary as a teacher could not fully cover), she told him, "I'm not waiting for you to support me. I have always looked for a job and I can spend two, three days without food, and that's fine. But I can't make my children go through that." While asserting her autonomy and ability to live independently of her husband and his financial contributions, through her position as a mother, this woman feels empowered to demand that her husband satisfy his obligations to his children. Other women agreed that being a mother could involve pain but that when a partner demanded that children also experience pain because of his violence or neglect it was time to exert women's position of agency and authority as mothers by standing up to that man. When women felt unable to protect their children from their partner, standing up to their partner in order to regain their authority and autonomy as mothers sometimes necessitated permanently leaving.

Both in cases in which they left and in cases in which they stayed, mothers encouraged daughters to be less tolerant of men's violence in their lives. Although women's priority for all of their children was for them to go to school in order to facilitate the children's upward mobility as adults, women were especially concerned about their daughters' futures. They urged their daughters to stay in school and be independent because they did not want their daughters to depend on men who could potentially abuse them. As Maria explained,

> *I talk to my daughters and tell them to study. That they never become like me because I did not study. I tell them, "Take advantage of this time, study early in life. When you have finished your studies, then you can work." So that they learn to support themselves. "You are not going to depend on anyone, you are going to have a job, my daughter." I always tell them, "You have to go to school, graduate, then you go to a university or institute, and then you can have a boyfriend. Not now. Men deceive women. They take advantage of you" … I send them to school with the money that I've earned.*

For many women, the accomplishments they are most proud of are keeping their children safe, sending them to school, and seeing them graduate. It is through their investments in their children's, and particularly their daughters', education and the resulting increased chances of upward mobility and independence that women exert agency, authority, and autonomy inherent in empowered mothering and thereby effect social change through their child rearing practices in a context of poverty and discrimination.

Concerned both with setting a positive role model and teaching her sons to choose nonviolence over violence, when Daisy's teenage son tells her that he is bullied at school she tells him to be patient and ignore the bullies. Largely as a result of his mother's teachings, and in spite of being abused by his stepfather as a child, Daisy's son rejects violent forms of masculinity. In teaching her sons to avoid violence, Daisy's child rearing practices seek to challenge the hegemonic forms of Peruvian—and more broadly, Latin American—masculinity which facilitate discrimination against men who do not satisfy the ideal of the dominant, aggressive, heterosexual man as well as against women who challenge this form of masculinity.

Women also practice empowered mothering by seeking personal fulfillment and thereby becoming positive role models for their children. After separating from her abusive partner and leaving the shelter, Kristina found a part-time job at a photocopying business. Because she made very little money from her job, she and her two teenage daughters moved in with Kristina's parents. In spite of her work schedule, constant search for better-paying and full-time work, and parenting responsibilities, Kristina found the time and energy to volunteer at an Emergency Center for Women in her district where women can file domestic violence complaints. Her volunteer work results in additional transportation expenses to and from the center and in accompanying women to police stations and court, yet Kristina feels intense satisfaction through her volunteer work and hopes to be able to continue it. She believes that in feeling satisfied with her own life choices, and making sure she participates in activities she highly values and which contribute to social change, she provides a positive role model for her daughters. With one daughter on her way to becoming a nurse and another soon to graduate from high school, Kristina's efforts to rebuild her and her daughters' lives have met many obstacles yet also resulted in significant accomplishments.

Tania, a 29-year-old Peruvian mother of two whom I met at a shelter in Lima, also wished to be a positive role model for her children yet she felt limited in what she could do by her financial need. She explained that she initially stayed with her husband in spite of his violence towards her because she did not want her children to grow up without their father. However, when her husband began to abuse their children "it was too much" because she did not "bring them into this world to make them suffer" and she decided she and her children needed to permanently leave. She and her children moved into the shelter where Tania and I met in the summer of 2008. When we met, she and her children had been at the shelter for several months but could not leave because Tania could not afford to rent a room for her family with her salary as a teacher's assistant.

For Tania, a typical day begins at 5:00 am, when she wakes up to prepare her children's breakfast. She then hand washes their dirty clothes and places them on the clothesline to dry. By 7:15 am, she and her children leave the shelter so that she can drop off her daughter at school and she and her son can continue on to her job as a teacher's assistant at a daycare where she works daily from 8am-3pm for slightly less than minimum wage. She feels lucky to have a job, especially one that provides her and her son with lunch and gives her a discount on her son's tuition.

Tania's employment status, however, cannot guarantee that she will be able to meet her family's needs. As was the case for all of the women I interviewed in Lima, Tania does not receive health insurance through her work. She has to pay for health emergencies out-of-pocket, and a recent illness has drained all her savings. On Saturdays, she and her children go to an acquaintance's house where Tania works as a cleaning lady to supplement her income. Even with her regular job and extra work, in the six months she and her children have been at the shelter she has not been able to save enough money to move out and rent a room, and she worries about becoming homeless when she leaves the shelter. She also worries that she or her children will get sick and she will not be able to meet the resulting medical expenses. Like many of the women in Lima I interviewed, Tania had no family in Lima to count on for financial or moral support because years earlier she had migrated to the city from her rural community. Tania's poverty, partly illustrated through her low salary and lack of health insurance, resulted in her difficulty in leaving the shelter and rebuilding her and her children's lives in spite of her best intentions and hard work. At the same time, by leaving an abusive home, she asserted her autonomy and consciously rejected men's abuse of women, thereby teaching her children a valuable lesson in distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable ways of treating one's partner.

## Empowered mothering in Texas

At twelve per cent of the population, Latinos are the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000); Latinos of Mexican origin make up over half of the Latino population. Among Latinos, undocumented Latinos are especially vulnerable to racism and other forms of discrimination that prevent them from having access to such basic services as health care. Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988) has argued that today, as in the past, poor women of color are commonly considered more as cheap labor than as women with families whose needs must be met and families protected. Focusing on undocumented Latinas, Grace Chang suggests that the U.S. government's immigration policies maintain "women of color as superexploitable, low-wage labor" (1994: 261) and public anti-immigrant sentiments present undocumented Latina women's children "as somehow less worthy" than other children (1994: 278). Through the denial of resources and opportunities available to other mothers and children, these policies and public sentiments undermine women's ability to empower themselves and their children.

In discussing their lives with me, and especially their work outside the home and mothering practices, it became clear that undocumented Mexican women in Texas, like poor migrant women in Lima, faced structural constraints that limited their ability to fully exercise their autonomy and empower themselves and their children. Sara, a twenty-six-year-old Mexican woman, had this to say when I asked what she thought of her life in the U.S.:

> *We came here in search of a better life. Over there they tell us, the United States, the United States. But it is a very hard life that one spends working here [in the U.S]. One doesn't have insurance here. Social security. If you are not from here, from the United States, the government doesn't help you.*

Sara and other women I interviewed were limited in what they could provide for themselves and their children as undocumented immigrants, yet as in the case of Peruvian women, she and other undocumented Mexican women found ways to exert agency and authority as individuals and as mothers. Income from work in restaurant kitchens and cleaning homes provided money for basic needs, yet marginalization and widespread racism within their host communities affected their ability to protect themselves and their children on an everyday basis.

Like Daisy's son, the children of the women I interviewed in Texas faced discrimination at school. They also experienced discrimination in their neighborhoods. In this sense, although "conflicts surrounding gender roles and the search for individual autonomy" have been "central to a middle-class white understanding of maternal experience," these conflicts "are less relevant for racial ethnic women, who must struggle with maintaining recognition and identity as a subordinated group within the larger society" that does not value them as individuals or as families (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994: 12). One woman living in a small apartment complex that was roughly 50 per cent Latino and 50 per cent white and African-American, for example, described how "the neighbors yell at the children, they call them *mojados* [wetbacks]" when they hear the children speak Spanish. Although the women I spoke with believed it was important for their children to learn English—and the children agreed—they also wanted to teach them to value their cultural background by continuing to speak Spanish at home. Thus, just as women supported their children's learning English through ESL [English as a Second Language] programs at school, they asserted their own value as people of Mexican descent by continuing to encourage their children to speak Spanish at home to contest the messages they received from neighbors that their native language was somehow inferior to English and that as Latinos they are inferior to other people in the U.S.

Similarly to women's experiences in Peru, undocumented women's experiences in Texas point to children as the primary reason for leaving abusive partners, and to concern for children's safety as a significant factor in women's lives while in an abusive relationship. When I met Lucia, she had not left her husband because she and her children had nowhere to go and she feared that she could be deported—and thus separated from her children—if she sought assistance from the police. She described her husband as someone who wanted to control everything she did, including how and when she interacted with their children. After a heated argument one night, her husband pushed her out of the house and locked the door so she could not get back in. Concerned for her children's safety, and unwilling to be controlled by her husband, Lucia climbed back into the house through the children's bedroom window unnoticed and spent the night waiting for signs that her husband had fallen asleep so she could take her children out of the house to protect them from her husband.

## Poverty, differences, and empowered mothering

Empowered mothering takes different forms depending on the individual woman and broader context involved. Among poor Peruvian and Mexican women migrants, differences in individual life trajectories and in environments exist yet similar themes arise. For both groups of women, structural factors such as poverty and discrimination affect women's ability to practice empowered mothering. Yet, even within the challenging settings in which women mother, women's agency, authority, and autonomy (especially from husbands) as mothers is clear through individual child rearing practices that emphasize nonviolence in a context in which masculine violence is prevalent; efforts to support children's education; and engagement with volunteer opportunities that contest the acceptability of male violence.

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