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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0tn840xn>

### Journal

WOMENS STUDIES INTERNATIONAL FORUM, 67

### ISSN

0277-5395

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### Publication Date

2018

### DOI

10.1016/j.wsif.2017.12.004

Peer reviewed

**Illegality, Motherhood, And Place:  
Undocumented Latinas Making Meaning And Negotiating Daily Life**

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## **Illegality, Motherhood, And Place:**

### **Undocumented Latinas Making Meaning And Negotiating Daily Life**

#### **Abstract**

Federal immigration policies powerfully shape immigrants' and their families' lives, but the consequences are uneven across place. Taking seriously the notion of place as socially constructed, this article draws from two qualitative studies, one in the new rural immigrant destination of Southwest, Montana, and the other in the traditional urban destination of Los Angeles, California, to examine how undocumented immigrants navigate daily life in the US. In the face of legal violence and place-specific forms of exploitation, mothers exert strained forms of agency through access to or creative redefinitions of local work, social services, and networks. They make meaning of place as best as they can through the lens of motherhood, regardless of how they achieve financial or emotional stability for their children. The analysis reveals that illegality intersects with dynamic characteristics of place to produce varying experiences of exploitation and constrained agency centered often on motherhood.

**Keywords:** context of reception, illegality, immigrant integration, legal violence, place, undocumented motherhood, multidimensional agency

*Gaby is an undocumented single mother who lives in Montana with her youngest son Raul, a US citizen. Her two older sons were deported to Mexico in 2010. Gaby works two jobs as a dishwasher while Raul attends school and after-care. The logistics of daily life work relatively well as long as school is in session and Raul is healthy. But when school is closed or Raul is sick, life becomes unduly complicated. The network Gaby can tap for support is both small and dispersed; she lives several miles outside of town and has no close neighbors. Most of the time, she has to manage on her own. Gaby drives without a license, and her anxiety about a police stop is high. On the open roads of Montana, she is conspicuously marked by her deep brown skin and anywhere in public by her Spanish-speaking tongue. Despite these challenges, Gaby mothers Raul as best she can. She earns enough to keep them afloat, and places a high value on Southwest Montana's clean air, low crime and good schools.*

*Alicia is an undocumented mother of five in Orange County, California. Her oldest child is a recipient of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); the other children are U.S. citizens by birth. Alicia's husband—also undocumented—works more than full time, yet his wages are insufficient to provide for the family. Alicia works from home to care for their special needs child, making and selling food to help pay their monthly expenses. She lives in a densely populated Latino neighborhood where she gets around by foot or bus. Latino second-generation school staff encouraged Alicia to run for a position in the school council and she has been organizing school fundraisers for more than ten years. Although her family struggles financially to cover all their needs in an expensive city, Alicia has been able to tap into co-ethnic spaces that allow her to find economic and educational resources to mother as she intends.*

The distinctions evident in these two stories provide a base from which to explore how place shapes experiences of illegality and agency—even when it is constrained—among

undocumented mothers. Montana, one of the whitest and most rural states in the U.S. with among the fewest foreign-born residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), produces a different context for immigrants than does the global city of Los Angeles, home to a large population of Latinos and the largest unauthorized immigrant population of any US county (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011; Fortuny, Capps, & Passel, 2007). And yet, Alicia and Gaby share important experiences. As undocumented immigrants, they mother in the context of legal violence (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011); when immigration laws “serve as legitimating sources for the harmful treatment of immigrants” (Abrego, 2015: 265). This context produces fear and anxiety while increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Gaby and Alicia’s experiences are also informed by social constructions of Latina motherhood that center sacrifice and direct care (Bejarano, 2002; Schmalzbauer, 2014). Our particular interest in the relationship between place and motherhood is inspired by motherhood’s centrality to family survival (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011) and the ways in which geography shapes what Ayala and Murga (2016) describe as multidimensional agency—a form of agency that, while meaningful, is still constrained by pervasive structures of inequality.

In this article, we examine how undocumented mothers navigate and make meaning of the place-specific consequences of legal violence. Drawing on two separate studies, we compare the daily care practices and multidimensional agency of immigrant mothers across two distinct receiving areas, one that is “traditional” and urban, and another that is “new” and rural. This analytic strategy reveals that illegality intersects with dynamic characteristics of place to produce varying experiences of exploitation and multidimensional agency centered often on motherhood. We argue that even in the face of different and vast structural limitations, undocumented women

with children make place meaningful by taking advantage of those characteristics of their environment that allow them to fulfill their socially constructed roles as mothers.

### **Illegality and Place**

Today's context of immigration is characterized by historically specific conditions that powerfully mark immigrants. Legal status, as conferred by federal immigration law, is a central determinant of an immigrant's life chances (Massey & Bartley, 2005), as it determines complex rewards and penalties that stratify immigrants' experiences. In this system, undocumented immigrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, criminalization, and dehumanization (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). The social, political, and legal production of "illegality" — the condition of undocumented immigrants' legal status and deportability (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2013)—restrains immigrants from securing rights and resources. In the last few decades, illegality has gained broad significance as immigration laws have converged with criminal laws in punitive ways that vary across states and cities (Stumpf, 2006; Varsanyi, 2010). Enforcement tactics that combine federal law with local law enforcement agencies have led to record numbers of detentions and deportations (Golash-Boza, 2015), with a steep increase in deportation of people apprehended through interior enforcement after the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 (Abrego, et al., Forthcoming). Local context therefore matters greatly for how immigrants experience illegality.

Place is dynamic and textured in ways that also matter for immigrants' lives. Each place of settlement is comprised of economies that determine job opportunities; demographics that are characterized by spatial segregation, population size, and history of co-ethnic communities; and state and local policies that facilitate or block access to services (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Nelson & Nelson, 2011; Price, 2012; Silvey & Lawson, 1999; Singer, 2013)—all of which

contribute to how immigrants fare socially and economically (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Each place, moreover, produces a local notion of what is “normal” or “mainstream” in which immigrants embody, through skin color and language, particular experiences of illegality (García & Schmalzbauer, 2017; Licona & Maldonado, 2014). Built environments and natural landscapes further impact immigrants’ physical and socioeconomic mobility by delimiting access to education and employment (Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013).

Street-level bureaucrats, those people who interact with clients in local schools, service agencies, and medical settings play important roles in the lives of immigrants, especially in prohibitive legal contexts. Depending on how street-level bureaucrats are situated in relation to both local immigration politics and the reigning professional expectations of their fields, these workers have tremendous influence over how immigration policies are interpreted and carried out (Marrow, 2011; Deeb-Sossa & Bickham Mendez, 2008; Schmalzbauer, 2014). For example, while Marrow (2011) found service workers in North Carolina likely to bend rules to support immigrants, Winders (2008) found the opposite to be the case in Tennessee, where workers defied legal orders and refused to file citizenship papers for babies born in a regional hospital. Whether street-level bureaucrats in immigrant destinations speak Spanish and understand the reality of immigration, or present themselves as ignorant, hostile or ambivalent to the issue, also influences service access and undocumented immigrants’ vulnerability to legal violence (Menjívar et al., 2016; Deeb-Sossa & Bickham Mendez, 2008).

### *Motherhood, Legal Violence, and Multidimensional Agency*

Across contexts immigrant women are charged with mothering—a “historically and culturally variable relationship” in which someone provides care and sustenance for another (Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994: 3). Gendered expectations generally prescribe that Latina

mothers prioritize their children's needs over their own while sustaining kids physically and emotionally through daily care work (Abrego, 2014; Bejarano, 2002). The meanings and practices of motherhood, however, vary greatly, as they are shaped by material consequences of class, race, and immigration status (Abrego, 2017; Dill, 1998; Glenn, 1983; Schmalzbauer, 2004, 2014; Segura, 1994; Zavella, 2011), as well as by structural contexts that promote patriarchy (Ayala & Murga, 2016). Poor mothers, and especially mothers of color, for example, have often been blocked from opportunities to provide financial stability, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation (Dill 1998; Glenn 1983). Still, poor women find deep meaning in motherhood and children become central to their identities despite the challenging contexts of their lives (Collins, 1998; Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

Some experiences are unique to undocumented and Latina women who bear the additional burden of mothering in a context of legal violence. Contemporary legal conditions and enforcement practices require them to mother while also managing the fear of forced separation from their children (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Dreby, 2015; Golash-Boza, 2015). And although men are more likely to be deported than women (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013), in heterosexual families it is women who must hold things together when the men are expelled (Dreby, 2015). Mass deportations, therefore, serve as constant reminders of the possibility of forced family separation (Dreby, 2015). In response to ramped up enforcement, undocumented mothers have been known to keep children away from schools after immigration raids or to more generally avoid health professionals and other service providers out of fear that they may contact immigration authorities or that their record of service-use may be cited to deny them legalization in the future (Menjívar, Abrego, & Schmalzbauer, 2016).



The structural consequences of legal violence are also likely to make mothers reliant on social networks—but these are already determined by demographics, spatial segregation, built environment, landscapes, and local economies (Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013; Flores-Yeffal, 2013; Hagan, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjívar, 2000; Schmalzbauer, 2014). In effect, place powerfully blocks or facilitates women’s network formation (Deeb-Sossa & Mendez, 2008; Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013; Menjívar, 2000). In some cases, social networks and community supports may help undocumented women better manage the challenges of daily life (Flores-Yeffal, 2013; Hagan, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjívar, 2000). For example, in urban areas, immigrant women utilize social networks to find work, and access social services, resources and information essential to their families’ well-being (Cerutti & Massey, 2001; Cranford, 1998; Hagan, 1994; Menjívar, 2000). On the other hand, the marginalization that characterizes rural settlements typically limits network formation (Deeb-Sossa & Bickham-Mendez, 2008; Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013). Indeed, Latino migrants to new destinations have fewer familial and kin contacts than do migrants who settle in traditional destinations (Donato et al., 2005).

Finally, we also want to highlight undocumented mothers’ agency, however constrained, as they navigate patriarchal expectations and legal violence in different places. We utilize the lens of multidimensional agency to make visible the ways that “women, embedded within a patriarchal structure, adapt, negotiate, resist, and/or transform the meaning of the schemas or normative orientations” of patriarchy (Ayala & Murga, 2016: 1) in their labor as mothers. Through our comparison across two sites, we call attention to the significance of place in shaping immigrant mothers’ agency.

## **Methods**

We draw from two qualitative studies to examine the place-specific experiences of poor, undocumented Latina mothers in Los Angeles, California and Southwest Montana. We pay special attention to undocumented mothers' narratives about daily life, as they reveal both the reaches of immigration enforcement and migrants' multidimensional agency in navigating exploitation and producing meaning out of local contexts (Das, 2007; Sigona, 2012).

From 2013-2015, Author 1 conducted 100 semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents and young adult members of mixed-status families in the greater Los Angeles area. Each family included one DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient and one or two relatives with different legal statuses. With an extensive history of conducting research with Latino immigrant communities and because Los Angeles is home to a large number of DACA recipients (Hooker & Fix, 2014), Author 1 was able to find DACA recipients easily and recruit their families through them. For this paper, Author 1 draws on interviews with 31 undocumented immigrant mothers (27 from Mexico, 2 from El Salvador, and 2 from Guatemala). The single-session interviews took place mostly in Spanish. They were recorded and transcribed. Author 1 used the qualitative analysis software Dedoose to code the transcripts thematically and then translated the portions of the interviews selected for this paper. This data is further complemented by participant observation at many meetings and events through various immigrant rights groups and organizations over the last decade.

From 2006-2012, and for six months in 2014, Author 2 employed ethnographic participatory methods, including 82 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with Mexican immigrant men, women and their children in Montana. The vast majority of the immigrants in her sample migrated to Montana from other states, most notably from California and Colorado, and lived in mixed legal status families. For this paper, Author 2 draws specifically from her

field notes and from 21 in-depth interviews with undocumented Mexican mothers. Author 2 conducted the majority of interviews in Spanish. A research assistant transcribed the interviews, and Author 2 used an inductive coding scheme as she progressed through them. All names are pseudonyms.

Following individual data analysis, the authors shared with each other numerous key experiences of mothers we had identified in our work. We worked together to identify common and contrasting themes and then shared with each other specific instances in the data to describe the nuance within each theme. In a collaborative process, we narrowed down the aspects of each place that most notably made the experiences similar and different for the mothers in both studies. These theme development and data sharing processes revealed to us the key aspects of place that shape lived experiences of undocumented motherhood.

## **Background**

### *Southwest Montana – A New Rural Destination*

Montana is the third largest state by geographic size in the continental U.S., yet has fewer than 1 million people, which translates into a density of only six people per square mile. Billings, Montana's largest city, only recently reached the 100,000 population mark (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Southwest Montana is mountainous and the distances between towns are expansive. Weather is extreme. Although driving can be treacherous, limited public transportation makes driving an essential part of daily life. Montana is predominantly white and English speaking, with one of the smallest Latino populations in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

While Mexicans have been migrating to Montana to work in agriculture since the Bracero Program, their recent and unprecedentedly large settlement in the region has been fueled by the boom in the construction of second homes and resorts that are part of the gentrification of the

Gallatin Valley of southwest Montana. The process of gentrification has forced most labor migrants to seek affordable housing in the rural periphery of Bozeman, the region's hub with a population of 35,000 people. Most live in individual trailers or town homes. Immigrants who work on dairy farms or on ranches tend to be the most geographically and socially isolated. To date, Latinos in Montana do not have a physical space, such as a community center or neighborhood enclave, to claim as their own.

### *Los Angeles, California – A Traditional Urban Destination*

Los Angeles is a long-standing immigrant destination. From the time Los Angeles was part of Mexico's territory, Mexican natives and multiple generations of immigrants have influenced Los Angeles's culture, politics, and social context (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005). Los Angeles is simultaneously home to the largest Mexican population outside of Mexico City, and the largest Salvadoran city outside of San Salvador (Waldinger & Bozorgmehr, 1996). Immigrants of various ethnicities from Guatemala, Honduras, and many other Spanish-speaking countries round out the nearly 50% Latino population (Ennis et al., 2011).

Los Angeles is vast and sprawling, with well over 10 million residents spanning dozens of neighborhoods, each with different job opportunities, transportation access, and amenities. The weather is generally mild, sunny, and dry throughout the year. While the city was built for cars, public transportation is available and well utilized in many low-income immigrant communities (Burgos & Pulido, 1998). Los Angeles residents speak many languages, but Spanish is particularly common—especially in areas with high concentrations of recent immigrants. Latinos live in multiple kinds of housing, determined largely by socioeconomic class and legal status (McConnell, 2015).

### **Work, Home, and Mothering**

We found that under difficult, exclusive, and exploitative conditions, undocumented mothers manage their feelings and expectations as they navigate patriarchal and legally violent structures. They make meaning and exert multidimensional agency through work, whether their labor is remunerated or not, in the public sphere, or within the home. The agency they exert through work, however, does not lead neatly to desired outcomes, as we demonstrate in this section.

The financial aspects of undocumented mothers' survival strategies in Montana are decidedly limited by the rigid gendered structures of the immigrant economy. Most immigrant mothers came to Montana with their male partners who were drawn by work and relatively high wages in construction or dairy farming. Though several of the women had worked in other places, few were able to find employment opportunities in Montana. From 2006-2012, only three of the undocumented mothers Author 2 interviewed had formal jobs. Two of them, including Gaby, were single mothers who found jobs in restaurant kitchens. The third began working with her husband on a dairy farm near the end of Author 2's formal field work. Largely excluded from the labor market, mothers make do, trying to find meaning in their domestic labor and in the time they dedicate to their children.

Recognizing these place-specific structural challenges, mothers tended to develop a narrative of home as a refuge. Mothers in Montana often claimed that in the context of harsh, racially-informed immigration enforcement practices where they stand out in the public sphere, home is the only place where they feel safe. Like mothers in other contexts (Ayala & Murga, 2016), they carved out meaning in Montana through "intensive motherhood" (Hays 1996), albeit without the resources and security that usually accompanies this term. In these cases, their multidimensional agency was guided by individual struggles understood through a better life for

their children in Montana. They therefore touted self-sacrifice as the trade-off for enhancing their children's opportunities and security. Sara's words are representative:

Here life is very different. There are no gangs. I know there are probably some drugs, but not like in Wichita. There it was a disaster. I prefer it here. It is more peaceful...

Sometimes I feel really sad because I don't know many Hispanos, but I accept this for my children. Because, for sure, life is better for them here.

Similarly, Victoria focused on the security Montana offers her family:

It is so peaceful here, it's beautiful and I like this for my children. We never hear about robberies and murders, or gangs and drugs like you do in the cities. In Colorado if you left your bicycle outside someone would take it. Or if you left your car open, someone would steal your stereo. Here it is tranquil.

Importantly, women navigate structures in ways that may be contradictory or not entirely fulfilling. In Montana, for example, immigrant mothers who came to value domestic work because it gives them more time with their children sometimes also bemoan their lack of economic independence. For Malia, Montana was the first place she lived where she was not able to work. "In Mexico I worked. I worked in Florida...I love to work! But here I am in the house day after day." Malia's new dependent domestic role made her frustrated and discouraged. Similarly, Rebeca moved to Montana after having lived in Texas for eight years, where she always worked to financially support her children and her mother in Mexico.

I like to work. In Texas I always worked. Even when I had my children I worked and continued working. It was only when I arrived here that I stopped working. I miss having my own money, money that I can send to my mom, money that I know is mine so I don't

have to rely completely on others...I know not everyone feels this way. I know women who like just being in the house. But for me, I miss my independence.

In Montana, where jobs for undocumented women are scarce, Author 2 found that many mothers in her sample navigate their inability to work outside the home by assigning new meaning to domestic and care work.

For a few of the mothers, this negotiating is emotionally difficult—especially because their physical isolation is compounded by a persistent anxiety about theirs or their partners' potential deportation. In this context, several mothers talked about home in Montana as a “prison” where they experienced great loneliness, leading, in some cases, to bouts of depression. Julisa, for example, is a mother of three, who has not worked since leaving Mexico to join her husband Pedro in Colorado. She has struggled with depression since arriving in Montana, but remains committed to what she can accomplish as a stay at home mom: “Well here, the time when the children are at school, well I dedicate it totally to the house. I clean the house, make sure it stays clean, cook.... Yes, I am always at home, caring for the children.” Like Julisa, a few women characterized home in Montana as *both* haven and jail. Even the women who described home to be like a “prison,” spoke with resignation but also with pride about their domesticity.

Mothers' multidimensional agency was also evident in other ways. A few women, for example, made bold moves to break out of their isolation and carve out informal employment opportunities. Ana, an undocumented mother of three, was dealing with the repercussions of her husband's deportation when Author 2 first met her in 2007. Without her husband's wages, Ana had to leave her trailer to obtain emergency food relief and search for work. After her first visit to the food bank, she gained the confidence to return the next week, and the next. Within a month she was traveling to the food bank once a week with her car trunk full of tamales that she

sold from the parking lot. As these examples of women's work in Montana reveal, making meaning of home and care work can be complex.

Contrary to the experiences in Montana, in the greater Los Angeles area undocumented mothers often have a choice of work opportunities—from domestic work, to hotel housekeeping, to garment industry and assorted factory work. Their multidimensional agency, while also complex, is expressed differently here because they can work outside the home, but their time with their children is likely to be limited. Irene, who became a single mother through divorce just a few years after migrating with her husband, felt relieved that although she had little work experience and was undocumented, many people and places would employ her without asking for a social security number.

It was difficult at first, but I started cleaning houses and working as a waitress at a nightclub. And I worked at both for many years. During the day I cleaned, and at night I was at the club. Work, work, work... I don't talk to my employers about my status, only about work... we've known each other for years with some co-workers and we all know that we don't have papers, but we just don't talk about it.

In many areas of Los Angeles, undocumented employment is so common that navigating the workplace without papers is not especially difficult. Although patriarchal structures ensure that women are not likely to earn enough money in any single job to provide adequately for a family – as evident in Irene's need to work multiple jobs – they are often able to find long-term work. All of the time they spend commuting and at work, however, is time that they are not with their children. Indeed, immigrant employment structures are gendered, and women are likely to find work at the bottom of the income hierarchy in domestic and other low-end services that keep them away from their children much of the time (Abrego, 2014; Hondageu-Sotelo, 2001).



Exploitation played out differently for undocumented women workers in different industries. In formal places of employment, undocumented women reported that their undocumented status weighed heavily on them when it was blatantly clear that they must work harder and earn less money than their documented co-workers. As Denise shared, even though she was grateful to have access to various work options in the area, this is a particularly frustrating and taxing experience:

One time I worked in a company making wooden doors and yes, it went well, I earned lots of over-time pay, but the people with papers made more than the people who are hired through [temp] agencies, for the same reason that we didn't have legal status. If there were layoffs, we were the first to be laid off because we didn't have papers....

That's when you feel the sense of helplessness because even the same managers and the boss would say, "Sadly, that's how it is. I see that you're doing better work than the others who have papers, but I have to keep them because if we fire them, we have to pay their unemployment benefits and all that. So I prefer keeping them at work."

As Denise's experience demonstrates, though Los Angeles offers abundant employment opportunities for undocumented immigrants, women still face inequalities in pay and treatment; inequalities that limit their family's well-being and their agency as mothers. Even those who are working have difficulty covering living costs in this expensive city. Their meaning-making in Los Angeles, therefore, is complex as it is based on opportunities to provide financially for children, but always with vast legal, economic, and time limitations.

Beyond the formal labor market, several undocumented mothers in Los Angeles became informal food vendors as a strategy to bypass the legal requirements of more formal jobs, but also to give them the flexibility in their schedule to spend more time with their children. Alicia,

for example, grew up joking that she was “allergic to the kitchen.” Although her mother was a good cook, she avoided domestic work in Mexico. Once in Orange County, and with five children to raise, she decided that she would experiment with food vending in an attempt to bring greater income into the household without leaving her children in the care of others. Alicia’s tamal-making enterprise is labor-intensive and involves the entire family; they work together to buy ingredients, chop vegetables, and coordinate order deliveries. Having loyal clients, Alicia has been able to contribute a steady income to the family while also playing a key role in caring for her children daily. As she explains:

It’s not that I don’t want to do other things, or that I don’t have time, it’s that I dedicate myself to [my children]... I cook, wash, iron their clothes.... And it’s hard work because it’s five of them. It’s not that I was afraid of going to clean offices or bathrooms or mopping floors, or whatever, that wasn’t my fear, doing all of that and earning minimum wage. What I always worried about was them—making sure they were well, they had stability, getting them to school on time.... That’s why I made the decision to work from home.

Even in a city like Los Angeles, where undocumented mothers have access to jobs in the formal labor market, they may exert agency by choosing informal work that keeps them physically close to their children and helps them prioritize their daily care (Estrada, 2016). In the remainder of the interview, Alicia shared that while her work selling food does not provide enough money for luxuries, she is proud that each of her college-age children is in college and she has helped to support them. True to the expectations placed on Latina mothers, Alicia is resilient. She stated, “Sometimes I get really tired, but what am I going to do? One day I complain and the next day I’m fine. Start over again.” Alicia, like other mothers in the greater Los Angeles area, has

produced meaning in this unwieldy place through informal labor to mother in ways that are physically present and intensive, even when financially limiting and emotionally taxing.

### **Navigating Social Services and Community-Based Resources**

The different geographic and demographic contexts of our studies reveal a notable difference in how undocumented mothers experience motherhood, based on whether they can access social services and resources necessary for family well-being. This section reveals that Montana's social service sector lacks the capacity to effectively serve a non-English-speaking population, while Los Angeles' service sector is well-developed. Mothers strategize survival and make meaning even in the face of blocked resources or stratified opportunities.

Roberta, who moved to Montana from a rural, but large and long-standing, Latino enclave in Southern Idaho, was frustrated by the lack of services available in Montana for immigrants, especially the undocumented, "In Idaho I had Medicare, food stamps, and help when I was pregnant and it wasn't so expensive... And here, no... I still haven't found free services. I have searched but I haven't found anything. The only thing I have found that is free is a vaccination and WIC." Maira, who moved to Montana from Florida, expressed a similar frustration:

...I miss having more support, like in other places where I have seen that they have English classes and they make the schedule work for families, like they have classes at night and if you have kids they have a place where you can leave them while you're there... But here, nothing.

After learning she was pregnant, Dorotea, an undocumented mother of three who moved to Montana from California, struggled to find a doctor who spoke Spanish. When the clinic she

attended finally located a translator, they pummeled her with questions about her immigration status, something she had not experienced before. The experience caused both stress and fear.

They gave me Medical Assistance in California. They give it to all pregnant women. No questions asked! There, it doesn't matter if you have documents, or if you earn a lot or a little... So they gave me medical help and they attended to me like they would to any other woman. No one asks questions. But it's not like that here.

Mothers aspire to learn English, and to have secure access to healthcare for themselves and their children, yet the place-specific context of their lives has pushed them to generate resilience through shrewd negotiation and struggle. This is further exemplified by Gloria who, when pregnant, told Author 2 she planned to return to Colorado to have her baby, because there “all the doctors speak Spanish and no one asks for your papers,” but would then come back to Montana because she felt it the best place to raise children.

Montana's lack of Spanish-speaking and immigration-knowledgeable service workers inadvertently give street-level bureaucrats more power, putting undocumented mothers and their children uniquely at risk. Examples of this were frequent in Author 2's study. In fall 2009, for example, a new office worker at the children's elementary school told Lourdes, an undocumented mother of two undocumented children, that in order to continue being eligible for free school lunch, she needed to show proof of hers and the kids' citizenship. Lourdes was scared and perplexed by the abrupt policy change. Her daughters had been receiving free lunches for more than a year, and she had only needed to provide pay stubs as proof of eligibility. Unsure of what to do, Lourdes called a woman she met at her church who speaks Spanish and English. The woman called the central school office and learned that school staff should not be requesting proof of citizenship. When asked about the incident, the office worker said she thought she was

doing the right thing by taking it upon herself to make sure that no undocumented child was taking resources from U.S. citizens. Without intervention, the reinterpretation of public school policy would have denied Lourdes' children their most stable meal of the day. In this case, Lourdes navigated the place-specific consequences of legal violence so as to secure school food for her child.

Savvy about the way street level bureaucrats wield power, undocumented mothers in Montana must exert their agency and find meaning in a type of motherhood that may require them to avoid even those services for which they are entitled. As an example, a community clinic director shared with Author 2 the story of an undocumented mother who called the clinic because her toddler had fallen, hit his head, and had been unconscious for a brief period. The mother had called the clinic because it was the only place in town with a dedicated Spanish-speaker on staff. This staff member told the mother that she should call 911 and get her son to the emergency room. The mother was resistant. She was afraid that the police would accompany an ambulance and she would be deported. Ultimately, a nurse was able to convince her to call an ambulance. The fear and stress this accident prompted exemplifies the legal violence that contextualizes undocumented motherhood in Montana.

As a traditional immigrant-receiving city, Los Angeles has had decades to develop its social service and community sector. Public employees often speak Spanish and even when no Spanish speakers are available, Author 1 has witnessed strangers offering to translate in doctors' offices, schools, courtrooms, and community meetings. Los Angeles is also the site of a vibrant, multi-generational immigrant rights movement, supported by a vast network of social justice organizations catering to immigrants—though the reach of this movement is uneven and can mean different things for women's experiences of motherhood (see, for example, Abrego, 2017).

Being able to speak Spanish with street-level bureaucrats can mean the difference between life and death in some cases. This is evident in the case of Carmen. When Carmen and her family arrived in 1988, they lived in a neighborhood in South Los Angeles with few immigrants besides their relatives. Although her extended family already lived there and had benefited from mass legalization in the 1980s, Carmen and her nuclear family arrived just as undocumented immigrants could no longer access IDs and licenses. The changing laws were difficult to navigate, “it’s like they closed off all the paths for us.” Carmen felt constantly at risk because without papers and surrounded by street-level bureaucrats who only spoke English, she struggled to communicate with service providers. She recalled a particularly frightening episode with her 7-month-old son who was having difficulty breathing. She took him to a clinic where no one spoke Spanish:

We were there for four hours and we saw that Camilo could not breathe. He was gasping for air, making terrible sounds... We would go to the receptionist and we would try to tell her, to explain to her using signs and she would only say, ‘no español’ and ‘no Spanish’ and we would ask for help and there was no one to translate for us. We were all in the same situation.

After four years of worrying about both the consequences of illegality and the lack of co-ethnic support in that neighborhood in the late 1980s, Carmen’s inability to mother as she wanted informed her decision to return with her family to Mexico.

After some years, when they lost their jobs and could not make ends meet in Mexico, Carmen and her nuclear family returned to the same neighborhood in South Los Angeles where her extended family still lived. She came to reside in the same duplex and frequented the same

shops, but the demographics had changed and, even though she and her husband were still undocumented, things were easier.

Back then, even going to the pharmacy was difficult because no one could understand you. Now everyone speaks Spanish and even when I want to practice my new English, they tell me, ‘don’t worry, I speak Spanish.’ ... And now everything is a bit easier. Back then, it felt that everything was against us.

As demographics change to include more Latinos and more bilingual people, the ease of communication also shifts the experiences of undocumented mothers. Being able to communicate clearly with clinic staff, pharmacists, teachers, and other street-level bureaucrats allows undocumented mothers to better navigate daily life when they can access services to help meet their children’s needs.

### **Constructing and Accessing Social Networks**

Social networks are central to the well-being of immigrant families (Menjívar et al., 2016). Our two sites underscore how important geographic location is in determining possibilities for the construction and maintenance of social networks that, in turn, enhance or constrain family well-being. Immigrant women, in turn, make meaning out of place and motherhood based on the resources they are able to access through networks.

In southwest Montana immigrant women’s networks are small and dispersed. The lack of a Mexican enclave, the inability of most women to drive, the large distances between domiciles, limited public transportation and the absence of a dedicated immigrant safe space make it exceptionally difficult for most women to create new or tap into existing networks. Having relied on immigrant networks in other places, mothers were surprised and disheartened when they first arrived in Montana and found they were the only Latinos within the vicinity of their homes. Sara,

who moved to Montana after living for several years in Wichita, Kansas, also a new destination but with a large, rapidly growing, urban Latino population, said, “Here we live more isolated... There are days when I feel like there are no *Hispanos*. Sometimes I see them when I am grocery shopping, but it’s rare. It is just not the same as in a city like Wichita... There Mexicans are everywhere and it’s always like ‘hi, hi.’” Sara misses the social interaction and affirmation from other women that living in an enclave had provided her in Kansas. But more importantly, she misses the support that comes from living with an extended network of kin.

Montana’s vast physical geography makes it difficult for women to establish networks. As Ernestina explained, “It’s like we’re isolated... we don’t drive. And if you don’t drive you can’t see a friend or go out to try to find friends. There’s no transportation and most of us are afraid to climb into a truck or we don’t know how to drive.” Mundane mothering tasks like going to the grocery store, driving children to a school event, or getting a child to a health appointment, typically demand that women depend on their husbands, most of whom drive (although typically without a MT license), skewing the gender balance in their partnerships and limiting women’s autonomy as mothers. Roberta’s story exemplifies the implications of mothering with limited autonomy. After only meeting once, she called Author 2 to ask for a ride to the community clinic when her three-year-old son was very sick. Her husband was unreachable, working in the depths of a dairy farm away from cell service, and Author 2 was the only other person she knew who could drive.

Despite the barriers, through the course of her field work Author 2 observed women find meaning and strength through the creation of networks. They sought out other women for emotional and pragmatic mothering support. Author 2 watched one network take root in the local Catholic Church. There, three mothers worked with the Priest to organize a Friday prayer group,



a monthly Spanish mass and First Communion classes for their children. Victoria, one of the mothers, said, “It is very important that I can raise my children in the Church and teach them important values.” Developing a church-based network supported her mothering goal of passing down Catholic values and teachings to her children. Additionally, a few families in one trailer park began to watch each other’s children, and a small childcare network developed among three families working on the same dairy farm. While critically important for daily care support, the isolated location of the farms and the trailer park meant that the small networks themselves were isolated, spreading hardship across the two small groups of women and limiting exchange among the networks. The networks, however, helped the mothers achieve their mothering goals in Montana.

In Los Angeles, densely built Latino enclaves facilitate network formation and when many are undocumented, they may be more likely to show solidarity in small but meaningful ways (Flores-Yeffal, 2013). This sense of belonging, even if only within a small radius of their homes, matters greatly for undocumented mothers. The sheer number of undocumented immigrants in some networks normalizes the immigration experience, allowing mothers to share strategies for navigating their undocumented status in the city and finding the resources to provide for their families. Alicia, for example, benefits from being able to participate in lending circles with neighbors and friends. Denise similarly described how grateful she was for the generosity of people in her network when she and her family first arrived:

They gave us the things they had bought used – used clothes, used dishes, small refrigerator; one family even gave us an entire set of dishes. Things like that. And we are grateful because in reality, like my husband says, when you come to this country, you’re not coming with a spoon, a cup... you just bring what you’re wearing on your back.

In Los Angeles, immigrant mothers accessed networks that served as sources for finding friends, roommates, and even partners. Densely populated Latino neighborhoods also made it possible to locate customers for their entrepreneurial activities at family gatherings, churches, parks, and schools. The area's large population of Latinos and immigrants and the common usage of the Spanish language lessen barriers to network formation.

Women's networks also serve as channels to distribute information about community meetings, political protests and other organizing efforts, all of which have been deemed critical to women's empowerment (Coll, 2010; Hagan, 1994; Menjivar, 2000). Living in a neighborhood, where many neighbors and fellow parents, school staff and community workers, as well as popular radio and television shows encourage immigrants, in Spanish, to speak up for their rights, makes it more likely that large groups of women will feel emboldened to organize and make public demands. Such was the case for Denise who described how the experiences in her neighborhood allowed her to claim her rights through participation in the mega-marches in 2006:

All of the people on the Spanish-speaking radio stations said it. And the truth is, sometimes people would say, "No, I'm not going to march. They're not even going to listen to us." But you tell yourself, "if I don't take the initiative to raise my voice and make myself heard. I am going to do it also for them, I go for me, for my family. That time, all the neighbors, we organized ourselves. One person took us, one person stayed to take care of the kids and stuff like that. We've been to marches this way. That's how I went to this most recent march (in 2013).

In some places in Los Angeles, the demography of dense neighborhoods lends itself to solidarity and collective action to promote change. Living with an undocumented status, in these cases, is a

shared experience and mothers navigate it collectively to minimize the challenges while demanding improvements that will translate into benefits for themselves and for their children. With such support, mothers are able to define motherhood to include political mobilization.

Author 1 witnessed and participated in conversations with mothers at school drop-off sharing information about particular stores where they can find herbal and natural remedies that they knew from growing up in Mexico or Central America. They give each other recipes and then provide directions to get to the nearest stores, sometimes across the city, in different neighborhoods of Los Angeles, to obtain the necessary ingredients. In these ways, the built environment of greater Los Angeles that concentrates undocumented Latino immigrants in impoverished sectors throughout the city also provides opportunities for undocumented mothers to access products from their home countries that prove important to their care work as mothers (see, for example, Estrada, 2017).

Geographic and demographic circumstances, however, do not guarantee expansive social networks for all undocumented Latina mothers. Author 1 also spoke with women who, for various reasons, had not been able to develop strong social networks. Immigrant mothers from new sending regions in Mexico, for example, had fewer physical spaces where they felt comfortable seeking out people and opportunities. The vast cultural differences across Mexico's regions are reproduced to an extent and mapped onto Los Angeles's terrain, making it harder for someone from Guerrero, Oaxaca, Cuernavaca, or any other non-traditional sending state to access the well-established networks of people from Jalisco, Michoacán, or Zacatecas. Indeed, indigenous and African descendant immigrants from any Latin American country are more likely to be excluded from the largest social networks (Estrada, 2017). For them and any other undocumented Latina immigrants not able to tap into their co-ethnic community, it can be much

more difficult to develop relationships of trust and produce desired meanings of place. In these cases, mothers' undocumented status weighs more heavily. Additionally, the process of gentrification, with its associated higher rents, continues to take over working-class neighborhoods throughout the city, leading to greater displacement of immigrant families and a disruption of the social networks that currently make such a difference in alleviating some of the most difficult consequences of legal violence.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Federal U.S. immigration law and the legal statuses it confers on migrants powerfully determine immigrants' and their families' life chances (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Menjívar et al., 2016). As immigration laws have converged with criminal laws, the punitive consequences have led to record numbers of deportations and family separations at the national level (Golash-Boza, 2015; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). At the local level, however, states and municipalities' laws, as well as their patriarchal structures, political, demographic, and social contexts also shape immigrants' day-to-day lives (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Nelson & Nelson, 2011; Price, 2012; Silvey & Lawson, 1999; Singer, 2013). In this article, through a comparison of undocumented mothers' experiences and processes of meaning-making in two sites of migration—one urban and traditional and the other new and rural—we argue that the complex dynamics and texture of place merit greater attention in the scholarship on immigrant integration.

Given the centrality of motherhood for Latino family survival (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Bejarano, 2002), we explore how Latina undocumented mothers navigate legal violence and patriarchal structures across place. We find that some barriers transcend place. In both Montana and California, for example, undocumented mothers struggle with anxiety and fear of deportation as well as patriarchal structures that exploit women's labor. On the other hand, we

also find that illegality intersects with dynamic characteristics of place to produce place-specific challenges and opportunities. Through multidimensional agency, mothers devise survival strategies that best fit each location.

Undocumented women exert agency in the places where they reside through the powerful lens of motherhood that expects them to provide their children with financial and emotional security. Across place, mothers aim to achieve stability for their family through work, access to social services, and social networks. The organization of housing and public space, access to public transportation, as well as temporal climate and physical terrain impact mothers' abilities to access existing networks or to create new ones. Stigma and social marginalization also prevent some mothers from connecting, even if the structural and geographic environments of their lives are conducive. Meanwhile, mothers seek work opportunities inside and outside the home to support their families. In the absence of paid work opportunities in Montana, they create meaning through intensive mothering, elevating their commitment to direct family care work. In their narratives, while often bemoaning the isolation of rural life, they tout the unique opportunities – small but good schools, low crime, and tranquility- that living in Montana promises their children. Here too, mothers make meaning through sacrifice. In Los Angeles, it is more likely that women can join the paid labor force in a number of sectors. In each case, opportunities are made possible by the contours of place and economy.

Places, moreover, evolve in dynamic relationship with the people who inhabit them. Our findings have implications beyond the experiences of undocumented Latina motherhood. As gentrification changes neighborhoods in Los Angeles and Southwest Montana, the ways immigrants experience and navigate legal violence and patriarchal structures will also change. Displacement will likely shift the way undocumented immigrants find work, access social

services, or develop and maintain networks—all of which have historically been central aspects of immigrant integration (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Efforts to welcome immigrants and give them a chance to establish roots, therefore, while they must understand the consequences of federal level immigration policies, must also centrally consider the complex local-level realities within which immigrants navigate daily life and produce meaning. Immigrants' multidimensional agency—at once structurally limited but resilient—is evident in their survival strategies and meaning making across diverse places.

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