

# Trans Migrations: Exploring Life at the Intersection of Transgender Identity and Immigration

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In collaboration with a community-based organization, we interviewed 10 transgender women who immigrated to the United States from Latin America about their migration histories, access to work, social support networks, and experiences with discrimination in their native country and the United States. Findings revealed a link between gender identity and the need to migrate to the United States. Participants noted severe forms of violence that included physical and sexual assault, discrimination in school and the workplace, and loss of social support upon disclosure of gender identity to family and friends. The culminating effect of these experiences resulted in the need to flee their country of origin to avoid further violence, and in some cases, death. It is important to highlight that participants also demonstrated steadfast resilience in the face of discriminatory treatment and described the positive impact of social support and community-based resources on their mental health.

*Keywords:* transgender, Latino/Hispanic, immigrants, discrimination, resilience

Approximately 39.9 million immigrants reside in the United States (U.S.), with a significant portion migrating from Latin America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In fact, Latina/o immigrants comprise 16.7% of the total U.S. population (Passel & Cohn, 2012) and arrive in the United States with considerably diverse cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical backgrounds, and consequent needs. While scholarship on Latina/o immigrants has grown in the last decade, very little research has been conducted on lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) immigrants (Morales, 2013). For example, no statistic currently exists on the number of Latina/o immigrants who are LGBT; however, this number is estimated to be at nearly 1 million, with approximately 25% living in the United States without legal permission for work and/or permanent residence (Garcia, 2013). Within the mental health field, even less is known about transgender immigrants, many of whom migrate to the United States in search of protection from violence and access to health services, including mental health care (Morales, 2013). There is substantial evidence of the discriminatory treatment faced by transgender (American Psycho-

logical Association [APA], 2011) and immigrant (APA, 2012) communities, which highlights a serious need for the mental health field to carry out scholarship to better understand the needs of these communities and to consider how these communities overlap in important ways.

Although a number of factors compel immigration to the United States, financial need is commonly a driving force due to lack of economic opportunities in many Latin American nations, which is further complicated for LGBT people due to bias and discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Cantú, 2009). Toro-Alfonso, Ortiz, and Lugo (2012) describe “sexual migration” as migration forced upon LGBT people as “the result of repression, oppression, and persecution” in relation to one’s sexual orientation (p. 59). Although the authors coined sexual migration to describe the migration patterns of gay and bisexual men migrating to Puerto Rico from the Dominican Republic, the phenomenon of forced migration due to one’s LGBT identity also captures the migration patterns and needs of transgender women arriving to the United States from Latin America.

Upon arrival to the United States, Latina/o immigrants have lower earning potential than individuals of comparable age and educational attainment. In fact, across the top 100 metro areas of the United States, Latina/o immigrants make approximately 37% less than workers born in the United States (Enchautegui, 2012). For transgender Latina/o immigrants, trends in earning potential are further complicated by structural oppression related to transphobia (National Center for Transgender Equality [NCTE] and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force [NGLTF], 2011). In a groundbreaking 2011 report by NCTE and NGLTF, the authors surveyed 6,450 transgender and gender nonconforming individuals and found that participants were four times more likely to live in

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extreme poverty compared to the general U.S. population, quantified as a household income of less than \$10,000. The authors also found that transgender women of color faced some of the toughest battles with interpersonal violence and structural oppressions. Thus, for transgender women arriving to the United States from Latin America, it is especially important to consider the various overlapping challenges that place women in positions of economic hardship that in turn impact their overall quality of life.

### Intersectionality of Cultural Identities

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) was a driving conceptual framework for how we approached the topic of transgender women's immigration to the United States from Latin America. As described by Bowleg (2012), intersectionality theory is the recognition of how interactions of multifaceted personal and cultural identities impact individual's negotiation of relationships with individuals and systems. Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to illuminate how Black women's lives are rendered invisible, and thus further marginalized, when their lived experiences are applied to already existing scholarly/analytical models of diversity and multiculturalism. Crenshaw states, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). The overarching goal of this paper was to make clear how transgender immigrant Latinas exist within multiple historically (as well as contemporary) marginalized cultural groups, and that by inhabiting these various spaces, women's lived experiences call for a critical, holistic empirical investigation that not only fully embraces and honors their lives, but also challenge the various systems that oppress them on a daily basis.

In this paper, we seek to highlight the intersection of gender identity and immigration. Beginning with gender identity, transgender is an umbrella term often used to describe, "persons whose *gender identity, gender expression, or behavior* does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth" while gender identity "refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female, or something else" (APA, 2011; p. 1). It is important to note that many transgender people face discriminatory treatment—termed as transphobia—which involves "the irrational fear and hatred of all those individuals who transgress, violate, or blur the dominant gender categories in a given society, which may be experienced by transgender individuals in different ways from microaggressions to violence" (American Counseling Association (ACA), 2010, p. 4). This kind of abuse has recently warranted asylum privileges for endangered transgender immigrants from Latin America, where violent expressions of transphobia tend to be more culturally sanctioned than in the United States, although the United States is not free from such expressions (Chávez, 2011).

The ways transphobia presents in various life domains is important to consider. Stigmatization on the level of societal beliefs and policies extends into and interacts with community-level, interpersonal, and individual forms of transphobia. Within interpersonal relationships, many transgender individuals experience rejection in their families of origin and social networks that can negatively impact identity development and psychological func-

tioning (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2013). Such bias is also experienced within key institutional domains, such as one's employment setting. Sangganjanavanich and Cavazos (2010) report that many transgender individuals face various forms of employment discrimination. In a study of 402 transgender Latina/os, 26% reported losing a job due to bias, 47% reported not being hired for a job due to bias, and among noncitizens (immigrants), 42% reported losing a job due to bias (The Task Force, 2011). Furthermore, 34% of transgender Latina/os reported selling drugs or engaging in sex work for income at some point in their lives (The Task Force, 2011). Similarly, Sausa, Keatley, and Operario (2007) found that transgender women's experiences with transphobia necessitated engagement in survival employment (e.g., sex work) despite participants' knowledge of the associated high risks involved.

The intersection of LGBT identity and immigration is dangerous for many (Burgess, Lee, Tran, & van Ryn, 2008; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001). Speaking directly to transgender women, many encounter a unique brand of stigma and discrimination in relation to gender identity and immigration status (Chávez, 2011). Transgender immigrant women from Latin America often face risk of severe violence during migration to the United States related to their gender identity, including maltreatment in the forms of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse during migration (Anderson, 2010; Chávez, 2011).

### LGBT Immigration to the United States

Legal residency involves the process of gaining legal permanent residence or a "green card" to work in the United States, but does not include the right to vote (Mulder et al., 2001). The majority of immigrants gain legal status through family sponsorship (Mulder et al., 2001) followed by the use of employer sponsorship (Simon, 2001), which requires demonstration of specialized, advanced skills and trainings needed in the U.S. labor force (e.g., software engineers). While formal routes to gain legal status are used by some, many immigrants arrive to the United States in an unauthorized manner (Passel & Cohn, 2012). Unauthorized migration, also referred to as "illegal immigration," involves overstepping formal processes when crossing the U.S. border and/or overstaying a temporary visa to visit, work, or study in the United States. Unauthorized routes are used more frequently by individuals who migrate to the United States out of necessity; those seeking employment and better living conditions not available in their home country (Yakushko, 2009).

Transgender immigrants often face great hardship in attaining legal status in the United States. Short-term permission via temporary visa programs to visit, study, or work in the United States require that immigrants provide evidence that they would be compelled to return home once their visa expires (Morales, 2013). Providing evidence may be burdensome since many flee their immediate systems of support—family, friends, and coworkers—because these very systems pose the greatest harm. Gaining permanent legal residency is also a major challenge since family and employer sponsorship provide the most accessible routes. With respect to employer sponsorship, transgender individuals face hardship in gaining specialized skills and trainings while negotiating often hostile work settings (Sangganjanavanich & Cavazos, 2010) in addition to overcoming antitransgender sentiment that

may prevent employers from hiring them in the first place ([The Task Force, 2011](#)).

A common path to legal status among LGBT immigrants is seeking refuge and asylum ([Morales, 2013](#)). This process may be especially difficult for transgender immigrants who must plead their case to an authority figure who may hold anti-LGBT bias ([Morales, 2013](#); [Reading & Rubin, 2011](#)). Asylum seekers must prove that they cannot return to their home countries because of a threat of persecution not protected by their government. Transgender Europe (TGEU) found that a transgender person is killed every 3 days in the world, with the majority of these murders occurring in Latin America ([Maderazo, 2009](#)). Thus, many transgender Latinas immigrate to the United States in search of safety and improved quality of life.

### Finding Strength in Community

While many challenges are experienced by transgender immigrants, it is important to point out the strengths and resilience within this community. [Rhodes et al. \(2013\)](#) found that highly networked circles of immigrants provided informal facilitative supports for other immigrants to secure housing, work, and transportation. [Chávez \(2011\)](#) found that LGBT immigrants frequently depend on friends and family as a source of support when facing adversity. [Pinto, Melendez, and Spector \(2008\)](#) identified positive coping strategies among their sample of transgender participants that included accessing resources to attain medical transitional needs (hormones) as well as partaking in activist and civic causes to promote awareness and welfare of LGBT issues.

Resilience describes the use of internal and external resources as a means to proactively overcome adversity in one's life ([Everall, Altrows, & Paulson, 2006](#)). An important resource that benefits many LGBT immigrants' lives is community-based organizations, such as advocacy and empowerment groups. LGBT immigrants described using community-based organizations as a positive outlet that countered the isolation and marginalization they experienced from larger society ([Reading & Rubin, 2011](#)). The authors also found that LGBT immigrants used group therapy to process traumatic histories, manage current stressors, build solidarity, and form problem-solving alliances with other LGBT immigrants.

### Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study was to add to the paucity of research on LGBT immigrants in the mental health disciplines. In an effort to fill this void, we collaborated with a community-based organization to conduct a case study on a group of 10 transgender women who were immigrants to the United States from Latin America. We were especially interested in understanding what motivated women to migrate to the United States as well as their negotiation of multiple culturally marked identities in key institutions, like the workforce and health care settings. Intersectionality ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) was used to understand participants' experiences, paying particularly close attention to the ways transgender identity and immigration overlapped in complex ways to impact Latinas' lives. Although this study was exploratory in nature—necessary for such an understudied community—we did hold several assumptions about our participants at the outset of our study: (a) women experienced bias and discrimination in their home countries and

the United States related to gender presentation and identity, (b) women faced limited occupational choices and consequent earning potential, and (c) women relied on community-based social and health supports since they were residing in a metropolitan area of Northern California, an area known for its vast availability of resources for low-income and historically marginalized communities.

## Method

### Recruitment

Given the challenge of recruiting from a historically marginalized community, we collaborated with a community-based agency whose mission is to serve transgender immigrants from Latin America. The first author worked closely with the agency to complete a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that involved a shared vision for advertisement of the study, interview protocol, and eventual presentation of findings. To protect the identity of the participants, we do not specify the name of the agency nor its exact location. The first and second authors completed the initial application for the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Agency staff reviewed and provided feedback that was incorporated into the final, approved version of the application.

Once IRB approval was obtained, staff posted flyers at the agency and handed out flyers to women they served during outreach services. Written and verbal communication made clear that participation in the study was separate from women's participation in the agency, and that a choice to not participate or discontinue participation would not result in any loss of agency services. Data was collected in the agency office during hours the agency was closed to allow for anonymity of participants from other agency participants as well as staff members.

Inclusion criteria for the study included individuals who were 18 years of age or older, transgender or gender nonconforming female, self-identification as Latina heritage, migration to the United States from a Latin American country, and verbal fluency in English or Spanish, since these were the languages known to the researchers.

### Participants

Recruitment resulted in a convenience sample of 10 self-identified transgender women who immigrated to the United States from México ( $n = 7$ ), Belize ( $n = 1$ ), Cuba ( $n = 1$ ), and Honduras ( $n = 1$ ). Sample size in qualitative research is often a heated debate as size can range from 1 to 100. In qualitative research, the focus is on depth of interview data instead of the number of people who participate ([Creswell, 2012](#)).

We selected a sample of 10 participants as suggested by qualitative methodological experts in various research designs ([Creswell, 2012](#); [Stake, 1995](#)) as we hypothesized that 10 participants would yield useful, ample data, which proved to be the case. As described by [Strauss and Corbin \(1998\)](#), saturation occurs "when no new information seems to emerge during coding" (p. 136). In this study, saturation was reached at the eighth interview as evidenced by repetition of themes and key phrasing that became readily apparent in the various tables and figures we used to chart the visual representations of data. The remaining two interviews

were used as confirmation checks. With respect to our original plan to recruit 10 participants, because transgender immigrant Latinas are a hard-to-reach community, recruitment of a larger sample would have come with great difficulty.

The mean age of participants was 36 years old (range was 26–54) with an average of 11 years residing in the United States (range 5 to 31 years). Each of the participants was residing in Northern California at the time of data collection. Although our sample was based on convenience, the women who participated reflected the larger Latina immigrant population in the United States, with Mexican immigrant women being largely represented (Mexicans comprise 66% of all Latina/o immigrants living in the United States; [U.S. Census Bureau, 2011](#)). With respect to sexual orientation, nine women identified as heterosexual and one identified as bisexual. Five participants were employed (five unemployed or engaged in underground economy) with occupations that included domestic work ( $n = 2$ ), service industry ( $n = 1$ ), and outreach in the nonprofit sector ( $n = 2$ ). The majority of participants reported completion of high school as their highest educational level attained. Nine of the 10 participants qualified as living below the national poverty level (\$10,890 annual income).

### Research Team

Our research team was comprised of four individuals. At the time of the study, two resided on the West Coast and two resided in the Midwest. The first author is a cisgender queer female of Puerto Rican and Guatemalan ethnicity who was born in the United States; the second author is a cisgender gay male who was born in México; the third author is a cisgender heterosexual female of Mexican descent who was born in the United States; the fourth author is a cisgender heterosexual female of European American descent who was born in the United States. At the time of data collection, each member of the research team had taken coursework on qualitative research methods, conducted qualitative studies, or published qualitative research. All four members of the team were bilingual (English and Spanish). The first and second authors completed all 10 interviews (five each).

The intersecting identities of the interviewers, as well as the ongoing relationship with the agency where data collection occurred, facilitated rapport and participants' comfort with the interviewers. At the beginning of each interview, participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the interview questions as well as about the interviewer. In research with other historically marginalized cultural groups, providing opportunities for participants to ask personal information about researchers (e.g., age, educational background, marital status, and ethnic background) facilitated rapport building that led to sharing of personal, sensitive material during qualitative data collection ([Chilisa, 2012](#)). Nine of the interviews were completed in Spanish and one was completed in English. The third author transcribed each of the interviews and all members of the research team served as analysts in the coding of interview data and were also involved in the writing of this manuscript.

Before data collection was initiated, the first and second authors assumed that participants would discuss challenges with employment due to transgender-specific discrimination and potential lack of documentation to work in the United States. These assumptions were based on previous studies on transgender women ([Sanggan-](#)

[janavanich & Cavazos, 2010](#); [Sausa et al., 2007](#)). Upon completion of data collection, the full team engaged in discussions related to "insider and outsider status" ([Kerstetter, 2012](#)) and reflexivity ([Shaw, 2010](#)), with these meetings occurring every 2 weeks during research team meetings. These conversations were proactively carried out since each of us had a different relation to the sample—areas of shared identity as well as areas of difference that granted each of us greater power than participants in the study for certain aspects of lived experience. For example, three members of our team were Latina/o while only one was an immigrant to the United States. Furthermore, three of us were women, yet we each identified as cisgender, while two of us were queer/gay, and thus members of the larger LGBT community. The area of difference given most attention was gender identity since participants' lives were greatly impacted by their negotiation of being transgender in their native country and the United States. As a team, we recognized the limitation of not having a member of the transgender Latina immigrant community involved in data analysis. As possible (and to the best of our knowledge), we followed the traditions of anticolonialist scholars who contested traditional forms of research used with underserved groups and used methods of inquiry that empowered and promoted social justice ([Chilisa, 2012](#)). One mechanism we employed was consulting with transgender community members during data analysis to ensure our understanding of historical and/or legal implications of information shared during participants' interviews.

### Data Collection

**Interviews.** The semistructured interviews were created with the intention of gathering data about women's motivation to migrate to the United States, migration history, experiences with work and career, mental health, and development of social networks. The interview protocol also covered topics specific to language acquisition, documentation to reside and work in the United States, and women's access and use of community resources related to work, health care, and legal aid. Each interview was conducted in a single in-person meeting that lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Participants were compensated with a \$25 debit card for their participation.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants completed an open-ended demographic questionnaire directly before the semistructured interview. The demographic questionnaire gathered information about age, country of origin, years of residence in the United States, educational background, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupation and means of generating income, annual income, and place of residence.

### Data Analysis

To prepare the data for analysis, the third author transcribed all interviews verbatim. To stay true to the participants' voices, transcriptions were conducted in the language participants chose for their interviews (nine in Spanish, one in English). When transcriptions were complete, identifying information was removed from each interview and substituted with a code number to protect participants' confidentiality. The second author reviewed the integrity of transcriptions; inconsistencies between audiotape recordings and transcriptions were not found.

Data was analyzed through the case study approach, a qualitative methodology used to gain insight into a central phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case study allows for the investigation of a phenomenon experienced by a small group of individuals who are bounded by time and place. Through various types of data collection, the researcher can construct a rich and in-depth description of the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2012). The data is usually analyzed through coding of transcripts and then themes are created based on codes. Case study was used for this study because it helped illuminate the shared and unique experiences of transgender Latina immigrants negotiating social, health-related and occupational contexts in the United States. Data analysis occurred using a team approach. Our team of four (two faculty, two students) was divided into pairs (one faculty member, one student) and each pair was assigned five interviews to analyze. Each member of the pair was responsible for coding interview text independently, followed by meeting with their team member to reach a final set of codes. Once each set of interviews was coded and consensus was reached, the pairs switched the sets of interviews. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure that all members of the research team participated in the coding of all interviews in an effort to accomplish a deeper level of analysis. There were minimal discrepancies within and between the pairs in their coding of the interviews. The few discrepancies that were discovered were discussed in a full team meeting where final consensus was reached.

Data analysis occurred in the language by participants used during data collection. Thus, we developed coding schemes, followed by identifying and narrowing down themes and matching key passages to reflect the final set of themes in Spanish for nine interviews and in English for one interview. When translating key passages for use in this article, the first author translated the theme and the second author back-translated the theme. Inconsistencies were not found. Previous studies have followed similar methods to prevent issues related to translation (e.g., Jung, Lee, & Morales, 2013).

## Results

The findings of our study centered on four major themes: (a) factors that drove women to migrate to the United States, (b) the psychosocial stressors present in women's lives, which included bias and discrimination across the life span, and how such stressors impacted women's mental health, (c) women's experiences in the world of work, and (d) factors that contributed to women's resilience in the United States (see Table 1). Although participants arrived in the United States from a variety of Latin American countries with diverse sociopolitical and economic conditions, major differences were not found between women's lives pre-migration nor once residing in the United States related to their country of origin. We proactively set out to end our presentation of findings on women's demonstration of resilience. While the hardships participants faced were intense and frequent, women exhibited skills with being able to develop critical intrapersonal and environmental resources that contributed to a positive sense of self and successful negotiation of discrimination in relation to their identities and lived experiences as transgender women who migrated to the United States from Latin America. It was important

Table 1  
*Major Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
Motivations to migrate	Freedom to express gender identity Transgender acceptance in the United States Economic opportunity
Psychological distress	Lack of socioemotional supports Targets of violence Impact of discrimination on mental health
Employment challenges in the United States	Challenges with legal documentation Forced entry into survival work
Contributing factors for resiliency	The healing power of faith Reliance on social support from family of origin and family of choice Civic engagement—drive to help others

to our research team that women's strengths were highlighted as the culminating outcome of our findings.

### Motivations to Migrate

Participants were motivated to migrate to the United States for a variety of reasons that included the freedom to express their gender identity in a manner that was not safely available in their home country, greater acceptance of transgender and nonconforming individuals in the general public leading to an increased sense of safety, and the perception of increased general economic opportunities to secure employment.

**Freedom to express one's gender identity.** Across the sample, the most prominent reason women reported that drove their migration to the United States involved the belief that living in the United States would afford women the freedom to fully express their gender identity as transgender women. Women's beliefs were grounded in stories from other transgender women who had immigrated to the United States, and upon arrival were able to access safe health care resources for their transition and were able to join a community of other transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Henrietta, a 32-year-old woman of Mexican origin shared her motivation to move to the United States:

I came (to United States) because I was searching for some freedom. Back in my (home) country, one is very, very marginalized for being transgender. I had already begun my transition a little. And . . . it was not easy for me in my job, my studies . . . it (discrimination) was one of the reasons I left my studies. The guys used to treat me very badly. And in my job, they used to discriminate a lot.

Participants were able to imagine leading a life in the United States where they would be allowed to be their authentic selves in their chosen gender identity.

**Transgender acceptance and safety.** Separate from women's belief that migration to the United States would allow for freedom to express their gender identity, participants also discussed the important role of transgender acceptance, which they described as a sense of safety from transgender-specific violence. Participants vividly described being victimized by family members, strangers, and even the police in relation to expressing their gender identity. Participants shared the belief that violation of human rights was common among transgender women in Latin

America and less common in the United States. Diana, a 26-year-old woman of Honduran origin, described her experience:

Discrimination starts from school age. I, in school, was accosted, and well it happens here [United States] too, but at least here the people, or the teachers, or the communities have a bit more education about gays and transgender people. Over there, it just happens and they watch or even do the same thing, sometimes even the teachers participate in the bullying.

Speaking to a general climate of hate, Adrianna, a 30-year-old woman of Mexican origin shared:

It is difficult, it's difficult, it's difficult. Not so much here in the United States, because in the United States, the gay community is a little more accepted. Like human rights and all that and in my country they are not. There, they will burn you alive because you are transgender. You would be hit, mistreated, your hair cut, they will burn you . . . it's horrible, it's hell on earth. Here, I feel I am free from that threat.

As demonstrated by the passage above, migrating to the United States was an option to flee persecution related to transgender identity, including extreme violence at the hands of various members of one's primary and surrounding communities.

**Economic opportunity.** Hope for improved living conditions, such as securing employment as well as a stable, livable wage, was a motivating factor for each of the participants to migrate to the United States. Some felt that migrating would allow them to have more employment opportunities and better quality of life. Sandra, a 31-year-old woman of Mexican origin explained how economic need compelled her to immigrate:

My brother said that it was better if I came here (United States) to work because I would earn money and also . . . here I could save money for my future. That's why I came.

Although connected to transgender identity, several women migrated to the United States out of economic necessity since similar work was either unavailable or paid less in their home country.

## Psychosocial Stressors

Participants reported regular, intense bias and discrimination in their daily lives related to their gender identity and immigration history, which occurred over their life span. Namely, women described rejection from primary relations that began at an early age for gender nonconformity as well as rejection in the United States (as adults) related to transphobia, xenophobia, and racism. This discrimination played a significant role in women's lives with respect to their ability to develop systems of socioemotional support as well as cope with the psychological distress they experienced as frequent targets of violence.

**Lack of socioemotional supports.** Participants discussed the hardships they encountered upon arrival to the United States, which included rejection from other Latina/o immigrants. Joanna, a 28-year-old woman of Mexican origin shared how she was homeless when she arrived to the United States and was shunned by other homeless immigrants because of her gender presentation.

In the group of people who lived on the streets, there were these kids, people who lived under the bridge, and because I also lived under the

bridge, they did not want me even close to them, because, as they would say, "he is gay." So, they treated me badly, discriminated against me, and they would shout homophobic things at me.

Participants described lack of socioemotional supports from immigrant communities connected to their gender identity and presentation. This rejection was especially difficult for participants as they shared language and cultural customs with other Latina/o immigrants.

**Targets of violence.** A common theme each participant shared was the frequent experience of being a target of violence, which occurred across the life span. Women described being singled out as youth for being gender nonconforming and again as adults in the United States for their gender identity and presentation with the added challenges surrounding their status as Latina immigrants. Several women shared stories of violence that included verbal, physical, and sexual assault from family members, community members, and human smugglers while en route to the United States, and authority figures (policemen) both in their country of origin and the United States. Sara, a 36-year-old woman of Mexican origin stated:

When I was 17, I was walking with my sister and a man came out of nowhere with a knife and attacked me. My sister intervened and he then attacked her. I only had a wound on my arm. I reported the incident to the police, but they never found the man.

In addition to harassment and violence, participants also described a general lack of protection from law enforcement. Dulce, a 54-year-old woman of Cuban descent, shared:

There is a lot of harassment from the police, a lot. Like they say, "if you see them don't run, fly!" Since I was younger, other transgender women taught me to not trust the police. Police men would tell me "cutie, cutie, come here."

Joanna, a 28-year-old woman of Mexican origin, described the discrimination she faced in the United States related to the assumptions that strangers held about her lack of legal recourse as an undocumented immigrant woman.

There are people that scream things at you and they know that you can't report them to the police because you are scared of being deported. It is difficult to be in those situations. There is a lot of discrimination because you are an immigrant and transgender.

Participants highlighted how their intersected identities as transgender immigrant women placed that at greater risk of facing harassment and violence as well as lack of protection from law enforcement.

**Impact of discrimination on mental health.** Two participants shared experiences of psychological distress in direct relation to the violence they experienced as transgender immigrant women. Cynthia, a 40-year-old woman of Mexican origin, described the impact of violence from family and community members on her mental health and sense of self. She also described how her mental health provider was providing support to increase her self-esteem.

I feel ashamed, I feel guilty for what happened in my life. Rape, maltreatment, and all that . . . today I met with my therapist and she told me, "try to let everything out because it is not good for you." I

tried to let everything out but sometimes, I can't. I want to cry, let it all out, and everything like that.

Henrietta, a 32-year old woman of Mexican origin, shared how a history of violence related to transgender identity has contributed to bouts of severe psychological distress.

I started to experience a lot of distress, I was very sick, a lot of anxiety . . . then I started experiencing paranoia about people persecuting me. I would get inside my own world where there were people looking for me, wanting to cause me harm.

The women in our sample shared numerous stories of violence and trauma that highlighted the serious dangers faced by many transgender immigrant women. The hardships participants encountered involved socioemotional rejection from key interpersonal relations as well as targeted violence from trusted loved ones, community members, and authority figures, like the police. These intense, regular experiences contributed to psychological distress for several of the participants.

### Employment Challenges in the United States

Participants reported a range of challenges with securing employment in the United States. These challenges illuminated the compounded barriers transgender immigrants face—women contended with bias centered on their transgender, immigrant, and racial identity and also had to deal with the tangible barriers due to a lack of documentation to work in the United States and/or mismatched documentation (name and gender) from their home country. Although women were diverse with respect to age and the amount of time they resided in the United States, across the sample, the two most prominent employment challenges surrounded lack of legal documentation and forced entry into survival work.

**Challenges with legal documentation.** The passages below elucidate the serious challenges women faced as a result of arriving to the United States as transgender women. Sara, a 36-year-old woman of Mexican origin, reported:

Say they ask me for my name . . . a legal document that says, "Sara." Well, I don't have it. But I consider myself to be Sara and legally, well . . . but in me, I am Sara, but to get work you have to give a legal name, with legal identification. And well I have my Mexican papers, which has my legal name, and . . . it makes me so angry!

Dolores, a 27-year-old woman of Belizean origin, shared how she began arriving to job interviews dressed in male clothes because her documents from her native country did not match her gender identity as female.

It is difficult. It's very difficult because of the situation that I am in right now. I want to find a job, but everyone wants you to show legal documentation, like a work permit. I don't want to work with documents that are not mine because I don't want to have any problems with the police. It is very difficult to find a job.

**Forced entry into survival work.** Due to the difficulty of finding neither employment nor other financial resources, some of the women were left with no choice but to engage in survival work, such as sex work, to make ends meet. Dolores, a 27-year-old woman of Belizean origin, illuminated this challenge:

I have all the intentions to work and do everything the right way. I have reached the point that if I don't find a job, I have to work as a prostitute to survive. Because no one is going to support me for free.

The concept of intersectionality was readily apparent in participants' lives when it came to the world of work. Women faced challenges that were specific to their intersecting identities as transgender immigrants from Latin America while several women faced the additional barrier of lack of documentation to reside and work in the United States. The issue of documentation was especially poignant here as women's legal name, gender on record, and preferred pronouns were not reflected on their home country identification. This placed women in especially challenging predicaments because working with false identification would have complicated their ability to seek asylum based on transgender need where having a criminal record can be means for dismissal of application (Morales, 2013).

### Factors Contributing to Resilience

While women faced frequent, intense psychosocial stressors in their lives, they also demonstrated steadfast resilience in identifying and solidifying community resources to aid in healthy coping responses. It is important to emphasize how women's resourcefulness was the most prominent factor that contributed to their mental health and aided them when dealing with the varied and oftentimes overwhelming bias and discrimination they faced as transgender immigrant Latinas.

**The healing power of faith.** Faith served a protective role in several women's lives. Belief that a higher power was responsible for creating transgender people facilitated participants' self-acceptance of their gender identity and helped them persevere when faced with transgender-specific bias and discrimination. Erica, a 34-year old woman of Mexican origin, shared how her religious beliefs helped her cope with lack of supports.

I was born like this and so the question I ask is, "If they hate people like me [transgender], then why did God permit us to be born this way?" With that . . . it's not a mental illness. There are people who see it as an illness, but I don't know. Sincerely, for me, I was born this way and I give thanks to God that he has given me strength to advocate against what people say [about transgender people].

**The importance of social support.** Social support played an integral role in women's resilience. When making the connection to factors that contributed to their resilience as adults in the United States, women most commonly mentioned the importance of social support from "family of choice," which typically involved other transgender Latinas. It is important to mention that building community with other transgender women primarily occurred through social service agencies in the surrounding area. Joanna, a 28-year old woman of Mexican origin, shared her experience:

Since I arrived to [name of city] I see that there is a transgender community, and I feel valued and that this is my place. This is my place . . . I feel grateful because this place opened its doors when I needed them the most.

Henrietta, a 32-year old woman of Mexican origin, shared how community-based organizations provided a "home away from home" where she could connect with other transgender women and speak in Spanish.

The organization supports me a lot. When they open on Mondays . . . sometimes I sigh in relief. I come by and say, “Yes, today is Monday.” And it’s not because I miss it . . . but the organization is like one’s home.

Women made clear the importance of having a community of other transgender Latinas who they identified as their “family of choice.” Participants described instances where other transgender Latinas helped them financially in addition to connecting them with resources (legal, housing, substance abuse) in a manner that was strikingly different than the rejection encountered within their families and communities of origin. Furthermore, “family of choice” assisted participants with combating acculturative stress (see [Berry & Annis, 1974](#)) in a manner that positively contributed to their quality of life and mental health.

**Drive to help others.** For a few women, the importance of serving as a source of social support to others was a driving force in their desire to be resilient. Erica, a 34-year-old woman of Mexican origin, described how her family’s reliance on her for financial support contributes to her resilience.

Now I want to fight for my life, fight hard for my family, I want to fight to have a better future . . . I have to think about a future for myself, even if I do not have kids, I do have my little sister, my family who need so much from me.

Joanna, a 28-year old woman of Mexican origin, shared how she derives strength and a sense of purpose from her desire to help other transgender women, especially women with less community resources and protections.

I want to continue supporting my community. It makes me happy . . . to be helping the girls, even if we can’t protect them, we can help empower them to move forward, help them by giving advice. For my future, I feel that someday I will return to México, but not where I was born. Rather, I want to go to the places most rural, to the communities most marginalized, to help my community.

Faith in a higher power as well as social support from transgender Latina community was integral to participants’ resilience in the United States. The subthemes in this section demonstrate how women utilized various resources—some internal to their worldview and sense of purpose in life as well as primary relations in their external environment—that contributed to a positive sense of self as transgender immigrant Latinas.

## Discussion

As demonstrated by the findings of our study, the intersection of women’s lived experiences as transgender, immigrant, and women of color highlights the importance of understanding the diversity of LGBT life and how such diversity can have staggering effects on one’s quality of life and mental health. The women in our study illuminated how gender identity and presentation, in addition to difficult economic conditions of their home countries, necessitated their migration to the United States, even when migration came at great economic and psychological risk. Consistent with [Chávez \(2011\)](#) and [Signorile \(2011\)](#), our participants faced threats of violence in the United States as transgender women that were further complicated by their immigration status. Namely, as found in [Chávez’s \(2011\)](#) study, several of the participants in our study reported being targeted as transgender immigrant Latinas because

others understood the common predicaments that prompted their migration to the United States and thus correctly assumed that they lacked legal recourse as undocumented individuals. Participants in our study shared how they experienced a general lack of protection and in some cases, faced threatened and real violence at the hands of law enforcement in both their home country and the United States.

The hardships women encountered also extended to the world of work. Participants confirmed findings from the [NCTE and NGLTF \(2011\)](#) report, “Injustice at Every Turn” as nine of our 10 participants lived in extreme poverty, and as found in their report, participants were turned away from employers who held biased assumptions about transgender Latina/os. Our findings are also consistent with [Sausa et al. \(2007\)](#), who found that transgender women’s lack of employment opportunities necessitated their involvement in survival work, like sex work. Our participants discussed their need to rely on sex work to earn money as well as the extreme fear they encounter with respect to placing themselves at risk of deportation and/or less likely to receive asylum if arrested for engaging in sex work.

Although several participants faced serious victimization related to their intersected identities, they also demonstrated steadfast resilience in being able to develop strong systems of social support, which they referenced as “chosen family.” Our findings align with the outcomes found by [Rhodes et al. \(2013\)](#), where in their study participants relied on highly networked circles of immigrants who provided facilitative support in key areas like housing, work, and transportation. Women in our study took these findings a step further as they relied on networked circles of transgender immigrant Latinas for basic needs in addition to transgender-specific resources like transition-related medical needs and legal aid to seek out asylum in relation to transgender identity. Thus, our findings demonstrate the immense power of transgender Latina immigrant community to help women overcome past and current hardships. Similar to [Reading and Rubin \(2011\)](#) and [Pinto et al. \(2008\)](#), the women in our study shared how their network of other transgender immigrant women actively sought out newly arrived women to provide them with emotional support and to connect them with the nonprofit organizations, which directly contributed to their resilience.

## Strengths and Limitations

We worked closely with a community-based organization to ensure that culturally sensitive methods were used during recruit and data collection. These efforts were especially important since participants were from a hard-to-reach, historically marginalized community. Although the two members of our research team who completed the interviews were Latina/o identified (one was also an immigrant) and members of the LGBT community, neither was transgender. Thus, working in partnership with the organization was an imperative to ensuring that we had the trust of the community and that safeguards were in place to protect participants.

Another major strength of this study was that we were able to attain saturation in our data collection efforts, which was a major accomplishment for such a hard-to-reach community. Furthermore, all interviews were completed, transcribed, and analyzed in participants’ preferred language (nine in Spanish, one in English)



so that clarity of data was available. This was important given the sensitivity of the issues discussed as well as ensuring that participants were able to fully express their histories and emotional states.

A few limitations were present in this study. First, working in conjunction with the organization may have placed participants in a difficult position to decline participation since they relied on the organization for socioemotional and facilitative supports. Although participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation via the informed consent and verbally during the interview process, they may still have experienced pressure to participate in the study. Another limitation is that all participants were residing on the West Coast at the time of data collection so their experiences of finding community support and access to resources were unique to this area. The mere existence of an organization whose mission is to serve transgender immigrants is an example of the well-networked system of social and advocacy agencies unique to this region.

It is important to point out that each of the participants self-identified as a transgender woman. The implications of this study should therefore not be extended to other trans-spectrum individuals, such as transgender men and/or gender fluid and gender queer individuals. Similarly, the findings of this study are specific to immigrants from Latin America. Latina/o transgender individuals born in the United States would likely have different life experiences than our sample. Finally, there were areas of great diversity in our sample with respect to age, length of residence in the United States, and country of origin. These limitations are important to point out because diversity in the aforementioned areas may have prevented identification of certain issues and/or lived experiences specific to one's age, length of time in the United States, and/or home country.

### Recommendations for Mental Health Professionals

As demonstrated by our sample, transgender Latina immigrants face many hardships that directly impact their quality of life and mental health. As such, it is imperative that mental health professionals engage in self-reflective exercises that examine their own attitudes and potential biases toward transgender and/or immigrant communities. Given that the women in our sample reported instances of bias and discrimination across various social domains of their lives in the United States, mental health professionals should assume that as members of the larger U.S. society, they too have been exposed to frequent negative messages about transgender and immigrant communities that have likely led to biases and assumptions about these groups. Considering transgender people alone, a recent poll of LGBT Americans showed that only 3% perceived public acceptance of transgender individuals in the United States, thus highlighting the overwhelming stigma many members of the transgender community face (Pew Research Center, 2013). It is important to recognize that stigma toward transgender people is multiplied toward transgender immigrant women, especially transgender immigrant women of color, as was demonstrated by our sample. Women described recurrent, intense verbal, physical and sexual harassment and assaults across the life span. They also spoke to the added challenges they faced in responding to threats due to worry about having to interact with police and for some, fear of deportation as undocumented women. It is therefore critical

that mental health professionals critically examine their own biases and assumptions and also assume that the general public—with whom transgender immigrant Latinas are in contact with on a daily basis—are negatively influenced by mainstream messages that paint a negative light on both transgender and immigrant communities.

Another area that participants described as directly impacting their quality of life in the United States was the world of work. Namely, the women in our study struggled with securing employment and therefore faced difficulties with earning a living wage. This lack of economic opportunity prompted a few women to engage in survival work and also placed them in very difficult interpersonal dynamics with romantic partners. Furthermore, difficulties with the world of work led to the resurfacing of trauma and negative mental health states for several of the women in our study. This is relevant to the roles of mental health professionals in that a key role many professionals play in transgender Latina immigrants' lives is with gaining legal residency in the United States. Since many LGBTQ immigrants seek refuge or asylum status as a path to legal status (Morales, 2013), a letter from a licensed mental health professional is needed to validate a client's claim of mental health impairment in response to trauma experienced in one's home country (APA, 2012). Thus, it is imperative that mental health professionals take seriously the roles of bias and discrimination in the lives of many transgender immigrants, for it is such bias and discrimination that prompt many to migrate to the United States with few economic and legal resources (documentation to reside and work in the United States) and also affect their psychological functioning in the United States. The legal means of securing documentation in the United States is a complicated process. It is therefore critical that mental health professionals learn about immigration policies and take particular note of how certain policies impact many transgender women.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Given the paucity of research that explores the lives of LGBT immigrants, particularly the transgender community, we recommend future research be conducted in this area that covers a wide range of topics and needs. As an initial step, trends in our research study suggests that future researchers should explore transgender immigrants' access to key institutions, such as the mental health sector, medical transition services, and legal documentation services. Such an exploration should involve barriers to care as well as transgender immigrants' success stories. Every woman in this study was able to successfully access mental health services through a transgender advocacy organization as well as during the process of applying for political asylum. This finding demonstrated how many services are interconnected for transgender immigrants. For example, the required psychological assessment during the asylum-seeking process provided several participants with an opportunity to initiate mental health services that were sorely needed.

Future researchers should explore the specifics of family support. A few participants in our study shared how their family's acceptance of their transgender identity shifted with time as well as upon their migration to the United States. It would be important to further examine the factors that impact family support of an individual's transition as well as their migration. Finally, future

researchers should consider career trajectories and the world of work for transgender immigrants; namely, how gender nonconformity impacts individuals' access to academic and occupational opportunities and how barriers within these realms may in turn channel transgender immigrants into particular jobs and careers. Furthermore, future researchers should consider how documentation to live and reside in the United States interacts with women's transgender identities and in some cases may further restrict women's ability to secure work that is consistent with their skills and career interests.

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