

A qualitative study of Salvadoran women's experiences and perceptions of civil war, migration and mental health

Ligia Clara

Advisor: Dr. Kari Jensen, Department of Global Studies and Geography
Readers: Dr. Zilkia Janer, Department of Global Studies and Geography,
and Dr. Linda Longmire, Department of Global Studies and Geography

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Department of Global Studies and Geography

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I. Introduction

1. Background

The number of Salvadoran women arriving in the United States has risen in the past years and is projected to increase in years to come. These women form part of the 2.3 million Salvadorans living in the U.S. as of 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey. Many Salvadoran women lived through the Salvadoran Civil War, a conflict lasting from 1980 to 1992 that left the country under “extreme levels of state violence and sustained terrors” (Menjívar and Gomez Cervantes, 2018), interfered with daily routines, and disrupted economic and educational systems (Leslie, 1991). Women have been especially vulnerable to trauma from political instability, given the impact that war has on family and community life, both of which are fundamental to their gender roles as part of Salvadoran culture (Aron et al., 1991).

Once Salvadoran women arrive in the United States, they must transition from having a “primary national and cultural identity” (Asner-Self et al., 2005, p. 162), to initiating a stressful process of acculturation (Asner-Self et al., 2005), which other American¹ residents may respond to with discriminatory attitudes. In some cases, immigrants who are subject to discrimination can even potentially internalize negative perceptions about their own cultural group. Adjusting to life in a new country becomes a struggle for many women as the stress that families suffer while they adapt to American culture may disproportionately fall on them (Leslie, 1991). Once they move to the United States, Salvadoran women must provide for themselves and for their families, which

¹ American is here used to refer to the residents, culture and society of the United States.

drives many of them to work the low-paying and labor-intensive jobs² that native workers tend to avoid (Gelatt, 2013). These situations can exacerbate women's existing mental health issues, and are often overlooked in migration studies that seek to analyze immigrant health and the accessibility of mental health services for the Latino³ immigrant population.

The Salvadoran population has also faced specific hardships due to their often undocumented status. This partly stems from the fact that the United States government did not grant refugee status or asylum to the majority of Salvadoran immigrants (Abrego, 2017; Coutin, 2004), which was caused by the fact that it was because of the United States' support to the military junta that the war started, and that it was also the US' fault that the war became so big and brutal and lasted so long (Chomsky, 1992). This lack of legal immigrant status made it more difficult for Salvadorans, especially women, to adapt to living in a country that has limited their access to social, economic, and medical services, and often hindered a "sense of involvement" (Bostean, 2018, p. 135) in American culture.

2. Salvadoran Civil War and United States' Foreign Policy

"The genesis of the current conflict in Central America, in the opinion of experts on the field, is the legacy of indecent inequality established under Spanish colonial rule and solidified by a subsequent dependency on the United States" (Suarez-Orozco, p. 357). The years prior to the Salvadoran Civil War were marked by widespread political repression and increasing economic inequality (Coutin, 2004). These issues were driven by an increasing competition for land between the rural poor and rich landowners, known as "the fourteen families" (Suarez-

² There are various reasons why Salvadoran women resort to low-paying jobs, including: a lack of English fluency, problems with their immigration status, (perceived) ethnic discrimination, not finishing their studies in El Salvador due to a lack of resources, or issues associated with the verification of foreign education. This will be expanded on on page 36.

³ Latino is here used to refer to people from Latin America, without specifying gender.

Orozco, 1990, p. 359), who excluded peasants from the majority of the nation's best land used to cultivate export crops (Coutin, 2004). Between 1961 and 1971, the percentage of landless families increased from 19% to 41% (Coutin, 2004, p. 38) and opposition groups endured assassinations, arrests, and massacres perpetrated by the military junta, which was funded and trained by the United States (Chomsky, 1992). These opposition groups then secretly formed the leftist guerilla organization Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1980, who hoped to promptly defeat the Salvadoran military (Coutin, 2004), but when that failed, they resorted to violence, and the war continued for 12 years.

The assassination of the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, is usually seen as the start of the war. In February 1980, he wrote a letter to President Carter in which he begged him not to provide any military aid to El Salvador's military dictatorship (Chomsky, 1992). He said that this help would worsen the repression, injustice and lack of human rights that El Salvador's people were subject to (Chomsky, 1992). However, he was assassinated a few weeks later, during a mass, by the right-wing government's "death squads", who operated under the control of the neo-Nazi Roberto d'Aubuisson (Chomsky, 1992). D'Aubuisson was the leader of the political party ARENA⁴ (Chomsky, 1992), which was the party in power for the whole duration of the war.

The war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992, claimed the lives of more than 70,000 people, the majority of who were civilians killed by the army (Suarez-Orozco, 1990, p. 359). Army tactics included using aerial bombardment on areas that were suspected of supporting guerilla movements, as well as widespread torture, disappearances and assassinations—

⁴ The Nationalist Republican Alliance.

95% of which the Truth Commission for El Salvador blamed on right-wing death squads and government forces (Coutin, 2004, p. 38). The war created a culture of fear where civilians had difficulty determining what connections, relationships, or actions would make them most vulnerable to governmental repression (Coutin, 2004).

By 1992, 25% of the Salvadoran population had been displaced, and the vast majority of them, more than 1 million, fled to the United States, most of them without visas (Coutin, 2004, p. 38). U.S. support for Salvadoran elites and the military contributed to the creation of the war and the difficult conditions for the common people afterwards. The United States government was determined to prevent communism from dominating the region since this would eliminate U.S. corporations' profits in the area, so the Reagan administration armed and trained both the military and paramilitary leaders of the death squads to get rid of all opposition. Central American military leaders were trained with both torture and murder techniques with the ultimate goal of preventing an equitable redistribution of wealth (Suarez-Orozco, 1990).

Since the United States government provided both economic and military aid to the Salvadoran government, they refused to recognize Salvadoran immigrants as deserving of political asylum and as victims of human rights abuses that they helped to perpetrate (Coutin, 2004). According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees, 97% of Salvadorans who applied to obtain political asylum between 1983 and 1986 were rejected, whereas applicants from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Poland, all of which were ruled by regimes opposed by this country's government, were approved at rates between 32% and 60% (Coutin, 2004, p. 39). Following widespread criticism of the "final offensive" launched by guerilla forces in November 1989 and the Salvadoran military's assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter,

the United States Congress approved the 1990 Immigration Act, which gave Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans for 18 months (Coutin, 2004).

Approximately 187,000 Salvadorans registered for TPS to stay and work in the United States for a temporary time period (Coutin, 2004, p. 39). Those who received TPS were able to apply for deferred enforced departure (DED) status, which also granted them work privileges and temporary residence (Bailey, 2002). 240,000 Salvadorans and Guatemalans (Coutin, 2004, p. 40) then applied for asylum following the U.S. government settlement of the 1985 lawsuit filed by the American Baptist Church (ABC) against Attorney General Thornburgh (Bailey, 2002). However, asylum had only been granted to less than 7% of Salvadorans by the late 1990s, and by 1998, delays in processing asylum applications meant that the majority of the 190,000 Salvadoran cases had been waiting for more than a decade (Bailey, 2002).

Deportations and anti-immigrant sentiments continued throughout the 1990s despite efforts to prevent them by Central American advocates (Coutin, 2004). In September 1996, Congress approved the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which expanded criminal convictions that made non-citizens more vulnerable to deportation, stiffened border enforcement, and made the process for undocumented immigrants to gain legal permanent residency more difficult (Coutin, 2004). Suspension of deportation was eliminated and a new form of legalization came to be known as “cancellation of removal” (Coutin, 2004), signaling a lack of humanity in how this country’s government thought people could simply be “removed”. In 1997, Central American advocates launched a new campaign to gain legal permanent residency for the 240,000 ABC class members who had applied for asylum years earlier, and a few months into the campaign, Salvadorans and Guatemalans joined forces with Nicaraguans who had also been

affected by the passage of IIRIRA (Coutin, 2004). This alliance then facilitated the passage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) in November of that same year, 1997 (Coutin, 2004).

Nicaraguans living in the United States prior to December 1, 1995 were able to adjust their status to legal permanent resident, but Guatemalan and Salvadoran NACARA beneficiaries were not granted the same treatment, likely due to Nicaraguans fleeing a government that the United States opposed (Coutin, 2004). The pressure for equal treatment “generated an unprecedented set of regulations” (Coutin, 2004, p. 41) under the Clinton administration. Asylum officials, who are usually only responsible for hearing asylum claims, were given the power to adjudicate NACARA suspension cases, speeding up the process (Coutin, 2004). The regulations also presumed that ABC class members would be subject to hardship if deported, although immigration officials still had a say in particular cases (Coutin, 2004). Due to these changes, permanent residency was granted to the majority of NACARA claims, with 87,516 of 131,688 cases adjudicated by the end of 2003 (Coutin, 2004, p. 41). Delays in the process, however, prevented many from leaving the country, and some were not able to return back home to bury and mourn older family members (Coutin, 2004).

3. Purpose and Importance

In order to explore how emigration impacts women who survived El Salvador’s Civil War, with possible guilt from leaving friends and family behind (Li, 2016), and the drastic changes in cultural norms and expectations (Asner-Self et al., 2005) that occur post immigration, I conducted qualitative interviews with Salvadoran women on Long Island who experienced their nation’s war. These interviews were carried out to answer the following research question: According to the experience and perception of female immigrants who lived through the civil

war in El Salvador, what is the relationship between migration and mental health? Examining the relationship between the mental health of women from war-torn countries and the cultural changes associated with the migration process, using the women's personal assessments, helped to uncover the personal experiences and emotions that result when creating a home away from home.

This paper will provide insight into what cultural and political factors may limit the widespread provision of mental health services for minorities such as Salvadoran women, and what aspects of Salvadoran culture may prevent women from seeking mental health assistance. Although some research has already been done on Salvadoran women's exposure to war and the onset of mental health issues, as well as how the difficulties these women face while adapting to life in this country can worsen previous trauma, most studies tend to focus on both elements separately. Instead, this project gives women a voice by allowing them to speak about the relationship between their stories and experiences in El Salvador and here.

My research, therefore, focused on analyzing the connection between war trauma, migration and mental health to start filling the gaps in existing literature. In order to fully understand how migration impacts Salvadoran women and those around them, their experiences prior to moving to this country and their difficulties once here must both be considered (Leslie, 1991). The circumstances under which immigrants departed their home country, which may have been related to political conflict, economic conditions, or other pressing factors, and can have lasting effects on mental health, are particularly understudied in relation to Latino immigrant health (Torres et al., 2013). Many immigrant women simultaneously deal with an increased cost of living expenses, high poverty levels, housing problems, and language barriers while experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. My research explored the impact that

fleeing from a violent environment has had on a group of people building a new life while potentially suffering from feelings of mistrust, isolation (Asner-Self et al., 2005), and grief (Dickson-Gomez, 2002). Hopefully, my project will contribute towards a better cultural understanding of Salvadoran women's experiences, both in El Salvador and in the United States.

II. Literature Review

1. Immigration Status

A study by Bailey et al. (2002) looked at the effect of temporary protected status (TPS) on Salvadoran immigrants living in Northern New Jersey. Given its temporary legal nature and the fact that its recipients still face a high risk of deportation, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to learn more about how TPS creates a form of “permanent temporariness” for Salvadoran immigrants and permeates their daily life by limiting their economic, social, geographic and political ambitions (Bailey et al., 2002). One of the interviewees described that she fled El Salvador during the late 1970s after she had been arrested by government forces, during a time when “dead people began appearing” (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 131). Most Salvadoran interviewees were employed in secondary and tertiary sector jobs, such as construction, carpentry, and landscaping, and others were working as lawyers or community organizers. Ironically, one woman shared that she worked in a factory making U.S. flags, and she imagined that one day she would be able to wave one after being sworn in as a United States citizen (Bailey et al. 2002). Overall, most people interviewed said they were stuck in jobs characterized by high turnover, instability, few long-term prospects, and discrimination (Bailey et al., 2002).

Just like other immigrants living in the United States, Salvadorans feel confined within a certain set of barriers. They are subject to discriminatory conditions in housing markets and half

of those interviewed had not finalized their high school education, usually because of the civil war (Bailey et al., 2002). Those who did have higher education qualifications were not able to get jobs within their academic fields because employers in this country did not recognize their Salvadoran credentials (Bailey et al., 2002). Along with the stressor of not being able to easily find reasonably paying employment, many felt responsibility and guilt for family members “left behind” in El Salvador—feelings that they try to ameliorate by sending remittances (Bailey et al., 2002). Geographic separation becomes a factor in increasing tensions between immigrants and family members across borders (Bailey et al., 2002). Another woman interviewed spoke about how people in El Salvador are under the impression that those who work in this country earn a lot of money, so they expect significant remittances in return (Bailey et al., 2002). What many people back home have trouble understanding, however, is that Salvadoran immigrants undergo major financial struggles, and as one participant described, a considerable portion of immigrants’ incomes is spent solely on food (Bailey et al., 2002).

Many Salvadoran immigrants come to this country sick, “carrying the scars of the civil war” (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 135). One of the people interviewed spoke about how she felt a greater sense of belonging in the United States than in her home country because everything she remembered about El Salvador, she remembered as a nightmare, and that even if she was forced to leave the U.S., she would still not choose to return to her home country (Bailey et al., 2002). Health conditions for people in this community also usually go untreated because less than half of Salvadorans in the United States have health insurance (Bailey et al., 2002). Many Salvadorans feel that healthcare is too expensive and may cause them to go into debt, or may harm their opportunity of obtaining their citizenship if immigration services find public charges against them (Bailey et al., 2002). For at least one Salvadoran, going to the hospital was one of

the “scariest” experiences of living as a marginalized member of American society (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 135). One of the women interviewed spoke about her loss of hope regarding ever becoming a legal permanent resident of the United States, to the point where she believed that the American government was trying to get rid of her through methods of “psychological frustration” (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 138). Another woman spoke about the physiological symptoms associated with living under a state of “permanent temporariness”, which caused her head to hurt and put her in a state of constant exhaustion and stress since she worried too much about her family (Bailey et al., 2002).

2. Stressors after Immigrating to the U.S.

While not all women who participated in my project are undocumented, some were when they came to this country, and it is important to look at existing literature on how people have been affected by the United States’ foreign policy decisions. Goodman et al. (2017) specifically explored experiences among undocumented and refugee women in the United States. Conducting individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women from Washington, D.C., this study looked at how once immigrant women resettle in the United States, they often endure stressors like being subject to an anti-immigrant American environment and being separated from their families, which can take a toll on mental health and add to previous trauma (Goodman et al., 2017). They also face stressors related to language barriers, limited social support, and perceptions of discrimination (Goodman et al., 2017). Sociopolitical based traumas were evident among all refugee women who reported that they left their countries of origin because their lives and/or their relatives’ lives were in danger (Goodman et al., 2017). Undocumented immigrant women disclosed that they feared never seeing family members again, since their lack of legal documentation would not allow them to return to their countries (Goodman et al., 2017). On a

more personal level, some women made the decision not to call their families back home often because these conversations would affect them deeply emotionally or they felt as if their families were unsupportive of their decision to leave (Goodman et al., 2017).

The story of Elisa, an immigrant from El Salvador, took a closer look at gendered family violence that took place post migration. She described how her brother was a violent man and would physically abuse her (Goodman et al., 2017). Marlen, also from El Salvador, spoke about an unwanted pregnancy, how she felt her child was a mistake, and how in order to survive, she had to be with her uncle in exchange for food, since she wasn't able to work while she was pregnant (Goodman et al., 2017). Among the many stressors endured by this group of people is also that of making economic ends meet for their families (Goodman et al., 2017). Dealing with their trauma, therefore, often becomes secondary to worries like financial security, pointing at how migration and its associated challenges may push people away from addressing the personal issues that make it harder to adjust to life in the United States (Goodman et al., 2017). Not having legal documentation made it even harder for these women to find employment, pushing them to rely on donated clothing, shared housing, and food banks (Goodman et al., 2017).

Despite all the troubles they faced, women found ways to cope and persist amidst a myriad of stressors and challenges (Goodman et al., 2017). Some of the women who spoke about their experiences shared that they coped by purposefully ignoring thoughts related to everything they had experienced, while others said they tried to distract themselves from emotional pain with jobs and classes (Goodman et al., 2017). Others turned to religion as a coping mechanism, saying they would read religious texts, pray, and remember to have faith on bad days (Goodman et al., 2017). Women also used certain aspects of the reality around them to make themselves

feel as though all these hardships were worth it, such as the fact they believed that the United States provided better education and more safety for their children (Goodman et al., 2017).

3. A Culture of Fear and Silence

Several pieces of literature have pointed at how the Salvadoran Civil War created a culture of fear and silence, which was so profoundly internalized within its population that it still influences their behavior decades later, and in a different country. Abrego (2017) spoke about how her mother, who fled to the United States during the war, rarely spoke about the terror around her, like the “pile of mutilated bodies on the street” (Abrego, 2017, p. 74) she had witnessed. For women like the author’s mother, escape was the only viable option in this situation because any sense of justice seemed unattainable back home (Abrego, 2017). During this time, people either openly joined the war, secretly supported it, or survived it by “following the unspoken rules of silence” (Abrego, 2017, p. 75) regarding what they saw or endured. This silence was the kind that made families run out of restaurants when they panicked after hearing songs by a Venezuelan protest group play on the radio, and the kind that forced people to hide in order to read censored books on social justice (Abrego, 2017). This constant fear, which made everyone question who was spying on their every move and who could actually be trusted, is what pushed thousands of Salvadorans to find safety in the United States (Abrego, 2017).

The United States, however, did not recognize Salvadoran immigrants as refugees, even though there was enough documentation showing that they met the conditions established by the United Nations 1951 Convention to qualify for protection (Abrego, 2017). While the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees claims that their relation with refugees is not dictated by politics, this is impossible to execute given that individual nation-states determine who qualifies as a refugee (Abrego, 2017). Every country decides who counts as a refugee or who is

an “economic” or “illegal” migrant crossing their border, treating “illegal” migrants as if they do not deserve equal human rights protections (Abrego, 2017). If Salvadorans had been given asylum or refugee status, their chances of thriving in a new country would have been much higher, and they would have had a more stabilizing and welcoming entry with greater access to educational, social and economic services (Abrego, 2017). Not being recognized by this country also did not legally confirm all the trauma they had suffered (Abrego, 2017).

From a cultural perspective, this lack of recognition “translated into various silences” (Abrego, 2017, p. 76), including the silence that was filled by other people who did not know how to understand Salvadorans, so they used stereotypes and imposed their personal experiences to make sense of who this group of people were (Abrego, 2017). These stereotypes have also been fueled by films and television shows that portray Central Americans as violent and dangerous, and characterize them through a one-dimensional lens that fails to provide enough of a political, social, or economic analysis to contextualize how violence in their countries proliferated (Abrego, 2017). Patriarchy played a role in shaping Salvadoran refugee experiences, as men expect women to protect, love, and provide stability for their children by caring and working for them daily, just like they had done back home (Abrego, 2017). This highlights an interesting cultural dynamic that must have made it more difficult for women to adjust to living here in the US. Even though women were being forced to adapt to completely different circumstances in a new country, they were still expected to fulfill the same gender roles as they did back home. How did this affect women as they tried to find a balance between keeping a cultural connection with their home country and finding some sense of belonging in the United States, where women’s roles are much less limited to the domestic sphere and many more form

part of the workforce? Did this end up leading to some sort of confusion among them and become a source of resentment for them?

4. Acculturation and Self-Rated Mental Health

Looking at the cultural context of migration, Bulut et al. (2016) explored the relationship between acculturation and self-rated mental health among Asian and Latino⁵ immigrants in the United States. The article states that due to the increasing number of immigrants living in this country, understanding the role that acculturation plays in the mental health of immigrants is necessary for an overall understanding of the health of this population and for directing public health policies (Bulut et al., 2016). Acculturation, “a multi-dimensional process by which immigrants adapt to a host society’s norms, values, and lifestyle” (Bulut et al., 2016, p. 836), is a complex process and must take into account ethnic identification, “because the strength of one’s ethnic identity is central in shaping one’s life as it reflects one’s subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture” (Bulut et al., 2016, p. 837). This relationship between both is seen in cases where, for example, some immigrants may still strongly identify with their native culture even though they have lived in the U.S. for a long time, while others attempt to rid themselves of their ethnic identity after only living in this country for a short period (Bulut et al., 2016).

Differences in how welcoming the host society is for a specific group of immigrants and the level of discrimination they face in it are likely to affect their acculturation related decisions and how much they separate from or assimilate to the host society (Bulut et al., 2016). Given Latino immigrants’ relatively negative reception in the United States, as well as their disadvantaged societal positions since many are relegated to low skill jobs that pay low wages

⁵ I use the terms each author used, which explains why throughout my literature review different terms are used: Latino and Latino/a.

and limit their economic and social mobility, they tend to remain more separated from U.S. culture (Bulut et al., 2016). Latinos may also be more prone to the mental health consequences of discrimination and structural disadvantage (Bulut et al., 2016), which is the disadvantage that certain groups face due to differences in resource distribution and allocation of power (Babacan et al., 2007). However, these issues could potentially be reduced by improving socioeconomic opportunities for Latinos (Bulut et al., 2016). For example, stressors like poor English proficiency and strong accents might deter Latino immigrants from seeking mental health services, which could negatively affect their mental states (Bulut et al., 2016). Considering how culturally diverse the United States is, our policies could instead focus more on developing multicultural educational curricula as well as establishing culturally sensitive health care (Bulut et al., 2016).

5. Race and Place

Similarly, the concept of race and place in the United States was analyzed in an article by Price (2012). Price looked at the hostile treatment against Latino/a⁶ immigrants in places like New Orleans, where they are seen as possible threats to the city's Creole and black identity, and as competitors for jobs and housing with the native population. Undocumented Latinos/as in the United States are considered to be vulnerable employees who are willing to work harder and without complaints, in comparison to native-born workers (Price, 2012). Some employers, however, confirmed that racial stereotypes have a much greater effect when hiring in comparison to factors like class, gender, age, and work (Price, 2012). For this reason, they preferred Latino/a

⁶ Although Latino is usually used to refer to both men and women, this author chose to use the term's male and female variations together.

workers, who are assumed to be honest and hardworking, over those they saw as alcoholic black and homeless white laborers with poor work ethics (Price, 2012).

The article highlights the observation that the United States is more accepting of anti-immigrant notions, and views them as separate from racist ideologies, so people in this country tend to be more tolerant of labeling minorities like Latinos/as as poor, dependent, criminal, and unwilling or unable to assimilate (Price, 2012). Pursuing a stance against Latino/a immigration is, therefore, not considered to be a racist act, since racism is seemingly reserved for “native-born nonwhites” (Price, 2012, p. 804). The connection between the terms “undocumented” and “illegal” criminalizes and further excludes Latino/a immigrants from the general American population (Price, 2012). When “illegal” becomes synonymous with “alien”, Latino/a immigrants are further removed from the nation’s social spheres and become an expendable and “immanently removable” group of people (Price, 2012, p. 805).

III. Methodology

1. Feminism as School of Thought and Methodology

My research is based on the school of thought called feminist critique. Feminist geographers seek to study the day-to-day experiences of women because they argue that geographical research often ignores women’s lives and the societal role of patriarchy (Kitchin and Tate, 2000). Men have traditionally been the main producers of academic knowledge, and the ways in which we interpret our world are largely influenced by “the lenses of a ‘male gaze’” (Kitchin and Tate, 2000, p. 18). Feminist research focuses on validating subjective experiences (Kitchin and Tate, 2000), which is what I attempted to do by giving several Salvadoran women the chance to reflect upon their personal experiences, what the events they’ve lived through have meant for themselves, and the extent to which their experiences as immigrants have been shaped

by their gender. Feminist critique is a “political project” (Kitchin and Tate, 2000, p. 18) that looks to bring social change by reforming power structures and emancipating women from the vulnerable positions they have often been relegated to. By presenting the difficulties in these women’s stories within a sociocultural context, and the oppressive circumstances they’ve been subject to, my research will hopefully achieve this goal.

My research applied a feminist methodology. Feminism allows the establishment of women as “producers of geographical knowledge” (Thien, 2009, p. 71). This gives women the ability to challenge the nature of data collected under traditional research approaches that often exclude information on women’s experiences (Thien, 2009). The lives of Salvadoran women have typically been shaped by what they can or cannot do under the authority of their male counterparts. Their inferior position had usually posed a barrier to them being able to share their personal experiences, which had often existed in the minds of others through “assumptions and misperceptions” (Thien, 2009, p. 73). Feminist methodology empowers women to elaborate on their personal situations and contribute to literature that discusses details of their lives that had previously been ignored.

Feminism can be described as an avenue that sheds greater light on the extent of social injustice and sets an agenda for social change (Thien, 2009). As a Salvadoran woman, I have firsthand seen how many of the women around me have not been able to reach their full potential because their male partners directly forbade them from, for example, working or pursuing higher level education. As the researcher, however, I have been given the opportunity to present some of their voices with the hope of bringing a much-needed ideological change regarding women’s roles and authority in traditional Salvadoran culture.

Feminist methodology favors the qualitative research technique of conducting semi-structured or unstructured interviews that allow an in-depth dialog between the researcher and the participant (Thien, 2009). This technique grants individualized importance to each respondent's voice as they exert complete control over the knowledge they create. With a topic as complex and oppressive as war, and considering the effects war has on migration, it is necessary to hear every voice and story to understand how both of these factors can radically alter women's lives. Feminist methodology provides women a space where they can better understand gender inequalities, but simultaneously reminds them of the power they possess.

2. Case Study Methodology

Along with feminist methodology, I used case study methodology to focus on examining the demographic group of Salvadoran women who experienced the nation's civil war and now live on Long Island. This methodology is useful when carrying out in-depth investigations, and allows the researcher to extensively understand the specifics of a single place, a certain problem in a single location, or a group of people who meet certain characteristics (Hardwick, 2009). Speaking exclusively with Salvadoran women gave me the opportunity to analyze differences in their levels of acculturation. It also let me closely examine what specific difficulties they faced upon resettling in the United States and how this was linked to their status as Salvadoran immigrants. The case study approach was appropriate for my research because even among people who share common demographic characteristics, the contents of their personal stories are equally important and deserve individual recognition. Although geographers have developed case studies using both quantitative and qualitative methods, my research focused solely on gathering qualitative data as participants related pivotal moments in their lives in detail, as well as their resulting feelings, and lasting effects.

Within the case study methodology, I applied an exploratory case study methodology. In an exploratory case study, data is collected about a particular topic and its results are then evaluated to serve as a basis for further research done at larger scales (Hardwick, 2009). The conclusions derived from my local research could be addressed in El Salvador, at a national scale, through studies that examine the extent to which the country's government has ignored the mental wellbeing of its population, both after the civil war and now. Within the United States, taking into consideration its high immigrant population, the results from my project could raise awareness of the need for better access to healthcare and mental health services for Salvadoran women.

3. Interviews

Using both feminist and exploratory case study methodology, I conducted interviews with Salvadoran women whom I recruited using nonprobability sampling methods. I found my first participants using homogenous purposive sampling, in which all participants shared the characteristics of being Salvadoran women who lived in El Salvador during the civil war, and currently live on Long Island. These were women I personally knew. I then used the snowballing sampling method, in which my first participants helped recruit others who met the eligibility criteria and who were interested in contributing to the research (Longhurst, 2009), and they initiated my contact with these new interviewees.

My questionnaire survey⁷ was translated to Spanish and then administered through six personal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The translation may have influenced my participants' answers given that the closest Spanish equivalent of some words and phrases in my questions may have not conveyed the same message or have had a different connotation than

⁷ The questionnaire is attached at the end of my essay.

they do in English. The qualitative questionnaire covered questions related to the women's experiences during the Salvadoran Civil War and mental health issues (self-perceived and diagnosed, if any). The questionnaire also included their more general experiences as both a woman and a Salvadoran immigrant within the United States' cultural context, and basic information about themselves. The questionnaire began with a few closed-ended questions, such as how long they have lived on Long Island, their occupations both in El Salvador and the United States, and their highest level of education. The rest consisted of open-ended questions, which helped to validate and acknowledge every participant's stories and experiences. These open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on complex opinions and behaviors with as many details as they decided to disclose (Longhurst, 2009). The interviews, which lasted between 40 minutes to an hour, were designed to finish with a question that tied everything together by asking how their memories from the war still affect them, even after overcoming the hardships associated with migration.

After the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in Spanish and then translated to English, the similarities and differences in the answers to each question were identified, as well as the most common themes in the responses. The transition from extracting generalized themes from the interviews to focusing on more individualized concepts was facilitated by organizing all the questions and responses on excel spreadsheets. I then tried to include at least one specific quote that fit under each identified theme, with its closest English translation. I also attempted to present a spectrum of experiences of varying degrees, under each of these themes, to ensure that all my participants' answers were accurately represented.

4. Ethical Considerations & Procedures

My research proposal and survey instrument was approved by the Hofstra University Institutional Review Board under expedited review. I obtained informed consent from each participant prior to beginning their interview, and I reminded them that if answering certain questions would make them uncomfortable, they could refuse to speak about certain topics or stop the interview at any moment, without having to provide any reason. Although my research could be seen as exploitative for relying on a vulnerable population's opinions, personal lives and time for my own gain (Dowling, 2009), my intentions are ultimately for a greater good. My goal was to establish a trustworthy and comfortable environment for every person I interviewed. For some of the women, this was the first time they spoke about these memories, which made me realize that I had to be especially careful with the nature of the questions I asked. I also had to carefully decide whether or not I chose to ask follow-up questions about some responses that seemed unclear, since some of my participants had never openly expressed what they have lived through, and felt most comfortable providing short and maybe even vague answers.

To guarantee anonymity and full confidentiality, none of the participants' actual names were used when I reported and discussed the data I collected. Each interviewee was given an identification number that only I had access to, and every informed consent document, set of notes, and audio transcript was labeled using this identification number to ensure that no names were ever associated with individual datasets. Participants were then referred to under a pseudonym in my results, and I made sure to inform them that their actual names would not appear anywhere in my research.

5. Positionality

I have an inherently personal relationship with the research I conducted, as I was born in El Salvador, and both of my parents, and their families, were directly affected by the Salvadoran Civil War. The effects were both immediate, with one of my grandparents having to flee to another country, as well as long-lasting, with psychological issues resulting from the events and fear felt during the country's twelve years of unrest. I have also personally witnessed how these effects are exacerbated by, for example, the anxiety of being unable to communicate in a new country with a foreign language. The undertone that the Salvadoran Civil War has had throughout my entire life prompted me to begin this research, as I wanted to submerge myself into the most intimate details of the incidents that occurred during the war in order to understand the broader sociopolitical climate of present-day El Salvador.

Considering my personal involvement in the topic, I expected my research to be influenced in a beneficial manner. One of my objectives with this project was for each interview to serve as a channel through which participants could verbalize thoughts they don't usually feel safe enough to share, without judgment. I felt a deep understanding of what was shared due to my subjective position, since I am also a woman who was raised as a member of Salvadoran culture. From a feminist standpoint of seeking to bring greater attention to social issues and to the inferior position many women are subject to, I wanted to delve into how the culture these women were brought up in potentially facilitated their oppression, both within their domestic spheres and as members of both Salvadoran and American societies. Feminism is an activist methodology that calls for a deeper analysis of authority and legitimacy, and encourages you to use your position as a researcher to promote an agenda for social change (Thien, 2009). My hope was that by speaking to my participants on an individual woman-to-woman basis, they could feel

as though their voices and stories, which have often been silenced, ignored, and marginalized, were being granted the power they deserve.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Participant Demographics

As previously specified, all of my participants were born in El Salvador. The women I interviewed have been living on Long Island between 10 and 35 years, and they all moved directly to Long Island from their home country. All of the women were raised Catholic, and all but two identified with Catholicism in the present day. Four of the women completed a high-school level education in El Salvador, while two of them had attended college in their home country. Ana completed the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in business administration, obtained certificates in customs administration, customer service, and sales, and worked in a company as an export coordinator. Emilia attended college for eight years, obtained a medical degree, and worked at a small clinic for a few years. Isabel worked as a seamstress and later as a cosmetologist, Erica worked as a secretary and a seamstress, and Olivia was a primary education teacher for 30 years in El Salvador.

2. Experiences in El Salvador

Memories from the Salvadoran Civil War

When asked about their memories and experiences during the war, all the women I interviewed spoke about the violence they witnessed, the sounds of gunshots, and the amount of death they encountered in their daily lives. Most of the women reiterated throughout their interviews that this was a time period full of sadness, panic and anxiety for them. Isabel recalled that even as the years passed by, the fear that the war generated in her was always the same. Erica, whose husband served in the military during the war, also emphasized the fear she felt due

to the constant threats she received, and she constantly used the word “panic” to reiterate how the conflict had and still made her feel now. Most of the women spoke about the curfew that everyone had to adhere to during the war. If people were not in their house by a certain time, they faced the risk of either getting arrested or being killed. This curfew was a source of anxiety for Emilia, as she recalls the worry she felt one day when her father got home a few minutes late because of delays in the bus schedule. Amanda also shared a similar experience as she related that because her bathroom was not inside her house, her grandfather would sometimes open the door in the middle of the night to go use it. When remembering what she felt during those moments, she said, “My heart would beat so fast and I was scared that someone would come in my house and kill us.” It was evident that this specific memory still affected her because her voice changed into a more fearful tone when she spoke about it and she touched her chest when she described her heart palpitations.

Ana was very descriptive about the experiences she shared with me. She said that one afternoon, she had been playing on the swings with a neighbor when a shooting began nearby and she had to run back home to find safety. She distinctly remembers seeing the muzzle flash of the gunshots, which shows that very specific memories still exist in people’s minds, even decades later. Amanda also spoke a lot about the graphic images she remembers from this time period, like corpses that were missing limbs and bodies that were floating in nearby rivers or hung from trees. She recalled a time when a man was being tortured in a nearby house, and she grabbed her ears as she told me that she could still hear the sound of his screams. She also told me several times that death did not correlate with older age during these years, as pregnant women and children were also killed.

Simple actions that we often take for granted were sources of angst for the women during this time. Most of the people I interviewed spoke about how hearing their doorbell ring was scary because they did not know who it was and what that person's intentions were. Amanda shared that you had no choice but to answer that doorbell and that regardless of whether it was a guerilla member or a soldier asking for food, you had to give them what they asked for. The problem, however, was that if the opposing side found out that you had "fed the enemy", they would automatically assume that you were part of their side and kill you. Ana even told me that when the doorbell rang, her 3-year-old nephew would say: "Who is it? A man here to kill me?" Amanda also told me that people used this rivalry to their advantage because if you had issues with the people around you, you could tell a guerilla member or a soldier that a particular neighbor was affiliated with a specific side, and the opposing side would kill them. Toward the end of her interview, she also told me that this was the first time she had ever openly spoken about this topic with anyone.

Emilia focused a lot on speaking about the role that guns came to play in her daily life. When speaking about the sound of guns, she said, "It made your stomach hurt and it would feel as if you had to use the bathroom all the time." She reiterated how much she feared death throughout the war. Emilia stated that one afternoon, she was sitting outside with her father and a bullet passed right between them and landed in her backyard. She told me that she kept this between herself and her father, and she never spoke about it again. In one of her most descriptive responses, Emilia shared that one day in high school, she heard a gunshot and when all of the students went outside, they saw that one of her classmates' father had been killed in his car, "with his foot still on the accelerator."

Behavioral Shift During an Interview

While it is evident that the memories from the war still affect all the women I spoke with, it was particularly noticeable in the behavioral shift of one of my participants. Olivia, who I know well, displayed a sudden attitude shift as soon as I began asking her questions. Olivia is usually very talkative and always openly expresses her thoughts and feelings. She constantly shares stories about her past, with a lot of details, and shows a sense of nostalgia when she speaks about her life in El Salvador. Her responses to my questions, however, did not convey how outspoken she usually is, and it was initially noticeable in how quiet her voice got. As the interview continued, her answers were very short, and I would constantly have to ask if she had any specific examples or if she could elaborate on her one-word answers. At one point, she even whispered one of her answers, as if someone would punish her for disclosing that specific detail. When Olivia did speak about her experiences, she emphasized that she used to get death threats from the guerilla members who controlled the town she lived in simply because she was a homeowner, and they told her that if they won the war, she would have to hand her house over to them.

Role of Religion During the War

Given that El Salvador is a religious country, I wanted to learn more about whether religion played a role in the lives of these women during the war. While not all of the people I interviewed expressed being very connected to the religion they were raised in, most of them acknowledged that it was present in their lives during the conflict. For Emilia, the time that has passed since the war and the fact that she has developed a closer relationship with God after the war seemed to have influenced her answer. When asked about the religious aspect of her life back then, she said, “I was not close to God during those moments, because I was too young, but

maybe he was with me because he protected me.” Isabel recalls seeing her grandmother constantly praying with the rosary during the war, as well as always attending mass, and she feels as though the church served as a kind of refuge for her grandmother. This conveys the same idea as stated by Goodman et al. (2017) who reported how religion is used as a coping mechanism during stressful moments. Olivia was very vocal about her closeness to God during the war, saying, “During that time, what I did was comfort myself with the Bible, mostly with Psalm 91. When the guerilla would come to threaten me, I would grab the Bible and read this psalm, which would help me feel like God was protecting me.”

Not only was religion a source of comfort for devout Salvadorans, but it was also one of the few outlets of expression during these years. Emilia told me that the Central American University, a Catholic institution in the nation’s capital, was very vocal about its support for the guerillas, which they expressed by publishing a lot of literature against the wrongdoings of the government. Governmental oppression, however, was once again evident when the death squads assassinated Jesuit priests working at the university. Amanda shared that religion was one of the few aspects of daily life that the war did not interfere with. She said that her town was very religious and often held vigils and processions, and the soldiers in the area would not go out of their way to impede these events.

Cultural Context of the Salvadoran Civil War

Understanding the cultural context that the Salvadoran Civil War took place in was a necessary aspect of my analysis, since it allowed me to get a better sense of why some of the women felt the way they did, both during the war, immediately after the war and now years later in the United States. A common theme I noticed in the women’s stories was the lack of importance given to mental health in Salvadoran culture and the relative inability to vocalize

one's thoughts back then. Amanda told me that for her, this type of oppression stems from her childhood experiences with her grandmother. She said:

“Since I grew up with my grandma, she was strong minded. If you broke a plate, you knew what was coming your way. My grandma said you could not shower during holy week because God would punish you, so my brother and I would not shower. You could not spit on the ground because God would punish you. When you would enter the church, you had to go in with your head covered, and you could not go in with short skirts because you were scared that God would also punish you for that.”

Amanda further elaborated on how much fear her grandma instilled in her by saying that although she knew her grandma loved her and vice versa, she could not speak to her about anything. She said she could not tell her grandma that she was scared of going to school during the war, even though she saw so many people dying. Her grandma had threatened her into submission and silence by saying that if she ever found out she had a boyfriend, she would beat her with a sharp stick 3 times, and that you would even pee on the floor from the pain it inflicted. Amanda shared that when she first began menstruating at age 15, she did not know what was happening and was afraid of telling her grandma, who she expected would assume she had been sleeping with someone.

In Salvadoran culture, most knowledge about reproduction is passed on from a mother to her daughter. Although most relationships between maternal figures and their daughters are not as strict and oppressive as it was between Amanda and her grandma, the anecdote does help to illustrate the extent to which Salvadoran women tend to limit to what degree their daughters can express themselves and what they allow them to do. This lack of emphasis on mental well-being was also shared by Ana, who said:

“I wanted to study psychology but in El Salvador, you cannot survive with a career like that. The country feels like there are basic needs that require more importance, like being able to feed yourself, rather than trying to seek psychological help.”

From a personal standpoint, this is not the first time I have heard a remark like this. Salvadoran culture usually places a greater focus on careers in medicine (which implies physical conditions only), as teachers, lawyers, or those in the business field. In Emilia's case, she studied medicine because her father forced her to, and he then did the same with her younger siblings. Given the poverty that most of the Salvadoran population is subject to, greater importance is always given to these perceived "basic needs" like being able to feed your children and having a roof over your head. As a result, issues related to how a person feels, what thoughts are running through their minds, and how these affect their productivity in other aspects of life tend to be neglected.

The women I interviewed all shared that the war created an environment of silence and oppression, which aligned with what Abrego (2017) referred to as an obligation to remain quiet about what you witnessed and felt. You were constantly advised to keep your thoughts to yourself because you did not know who you were speaking to and what that person's ideology was. If you expressed being in favor or against the guerilla or military to someone of the opposing side, this would have resulted in negative repercussions for you. Olivia said that in her case, she could only speak about how the war made her feel with family and close friends. All the women I spoke with also told me that after the war, they did not feel like the government did anything to care for the mental health of those who had been exposed to so much violence and traumatic events.

Looking into the Future: Immediate Post-War Remarks

When analyzing how the women I interviewed described feeling once the war ended, it was evident that the war had an effect on their views regarding the future. Isabel shared that when the war came to an end, her mind was still filled with fear. She said that because of this fear, she noticed that most people just wanted to leave the country in hopes of finding a better

future. Isabel was also scared of the environment that would result after the war was over. Given that she had reached early adulthood at the time, she found herself often questioning what would happen in the future when she got married and had children. She said that she was never able to fully understand how even though the war happened in a single country, within the same race, and among the same people, Salvadorans still killed each other and inflicted so much pain upon one another, which made her feel confused and frustrated. Emilia told me that it felt like it was impossible to see the end of the war. She said that the conflict delayed her career by 2 years because the university she attended no longer held classes on campus, which resumed after the war.

Ana reiterated throughout the interview that she felt as though the war was pointless, and that its objectives to redistribute wealth and reduce inequality were ultimately lost. She also stated that the end of the war left a lot of uncertainty among the Salvadoran population, given that many companies left the country and jobs were not being generated. While the Peace Accords that officially ended the war only stopped “the sound of the gunshots”, the poverty that had partially fueled the war remained, everything became more financially difficult, and, according to Ana, “life became even harder.” Erica said that while she did not directly feel any changes once the war finalized, she did feel the need to thank God that all of this was over.

3. Self-Assessed Mental Health Impacts

One of the main objectives behind my research was to give the women I interviewed an opportunity to reflect on the state of their mental health after the war. Some of the interviewees described the war’s psychological impacts on them much more extensively in their responses to questions that did not directly inquire about their mental health. For this reason, asking the participants if they had experienced symptoms of psychological distress since the war ended and

if they had been diagnosed with mental health illnesses after the war was necessary to see if they were personally aware of the mental health impacts they had elaborated on.

Although only Emilia was medically diagnosed with mental health illnesses after the war, most of the women I interviewed shared that they have experienced symptoms of psychological distress following the conflict. Emilia was diagnosed in the United States with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression, which she feels resulted from both the war trauma she was exposed to and the fact that she came to the United States against her will, leaving her country, family, and career behind. She told me that she feels as though the symptoms of her mental health illnesses did not begin until after she immigrated to this country, and that they were worsened because of all the fear and suffering she endured during the war. Emilia feels that the mental health services she has accessed in the United States have been both culturally and linguistically appropriate. She said:

“Most therapists I have seen are Hispanic and speak Spanish so they have a better sense of the trauma and violence that is characteristic of Latin American countries. A lot of Hispanic culture is very similar and because you know these therapists understand your experiences better due to their cultural background, you can express yourself better.”

Mental health services are offered in both English and Spanish at certain locations in Nassau County, which makes them more accessible to Hispanic immigrants who prefer to communicate in their native language. Although these services are locally available in Spanish, which is the language that all of my interviewees preferred, the number of people who seek help for their physical needs is significantly higher than those who access mental health services. It is much more common to refer those around you to known cardiologists or pediatricians than to

speaking about mental health, given that the latter tends to be a taboo subject. The stigma surrounding mental health issues prevents many people from seeking the help they need.

All of the women I interviewed shared that Salvadoran culture does not place an emphasis on mental health, which may have influenced why some of the women I spoke with experienced psychological symptoms, but did not address them. For example, Isabel mentioned that she felt depressed and scared after the war was over, even after living in the United States for more than a decade. Erica said that she would easily panic after being threatened by a guerilla member who held a gun to her head, and these feelings of panic only started going away after she immigrated to the United States. Amanda told me that what still affects her the most from the war is how scared she constantly feels. She feels that this fear manifests itself in how much of a reserved person she is. For example, Amanda said that when she attends mass, she prefers to sit towards the back of the church so that people do not approach her or ask her questions. As mentioned earlier, a central cultural component during the war was that of silence, and it is possible that war survivors like Amanda internalized this oppression so deeply that it shaped certain aspects of their personality.

Olivia admitted that she had felt some symptoms of psychological distress during the war, but she had dealt with these by relying on her faith and religion. Although her behavior during her interview suggested otherwise, she was very assertive about not having experienced any mental health impacts after the war. She shared with me that finding comfort in the Bible helped her overcome many fears and that religion made it easier to forgive all the people who threatened her during the war. She told me that the guerilla members who threatened her back in El Salvador also immigrated to the United States and would then speak to her “like they never

did anything.” Traumatic memories can be easily triggered for some people, which influenced the decision of many Salvadorans to leave their country and its constant reminders of the war behind. In Olivia’s case, adjusting to life in the United States also required that she learned how to cope with the presence of those who once made her fear for her life.

4. Experiences in the United States

While only Amanda immigrated to the United States as a direct consequence of the war, several participants mentioned the war as one of the reasons that drove their decision to leave their country. Amanda shared that her mother, who was already living in the United States during the war, feared for her daughter’s life in war-torn El Salvador and decided that she should move to this country. Isabel said that she left El Salvador years after the war ended, but choosing to leave her country was influenced by the lack of employment that hindered the country’s long-term development after the conflict. Olivia and Erica stated that financial reasons drove them to emigrate, but Erica said that her family “also wanted to leave El Salvador due to other consequences from the war, which were both personal and because of the country’s post-war environment.” She chose to not further elaborate on this response.

Initial Immigration Stressors

Most of my participants identified the language barrier as one of the main difficulties they faced when they first arrived in this country. Ana told me that not knowing how to speak English was initially a significant challenge because “you do not know where things are located or what to do.” Not being able to effectively communicate became a source of confusion and frustration for these women during a time when they had to rebuild a sense of stability in a completely different country. Amanda said that she attended ESL courses for a few months when she first moved here, but she became more fluent in English with the help of her bosses at her

current job. When she first began working with them 27 years ago, they told her that she had to learn how to speak English and gave her an English dictionary to help her communicate with them. Amanda found herself in a situation where she had to quickly overcome the language barrier as a necessary condition for employment, and she seemed very grateful that her bosses had helped her do so.

Ana and Olivia expressed that one of their most significant adjustments was transitioning from working high-skilled jobs in El Salvador to working as low-skilled employees in the United States, which Bailey et al. (2002) discussed in their literature. Ana, who obtained a business administration degree in her home country, has worked for many different employers in the United States: She has worked at a shipping agency, at Walgreens, for public schools and in a library. Although she's fluent in English and has validated⁸ her Salvadoran university credentials, she feels that she has not been able to put her academic skills and training to use in this country. She also wishes that she could have started her own business here, but her economic limitations prevented her from doing so. Ana summed up this aspect of her migration experiences by saying that moving to the United States "is like starting from zero." Similarly, Olivia, who worked as a primary education teacher in El Salvador for 30 years, said that having to clean offices when she immigrated to New York was frustrating, degrading and more physically demanding than she was ever used to.

Amanda shared with me that the main difficulty she faced when she first moved to the United States was trying to get over the general fear of living in and navigating a new and unknown place. She said:

⁸ To get one's credentials/certificates/diplomas validated requires the use of credential evaluation services, which are independent organizations that analyze international qualifications and recommend how a particular qualification can be compared to similar qualifications in the United States' education system and labor market (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

“I came to a country where I did not know anyone. Sometimes I had to take the bus and I wanted to cry because I was scared that I would get lost. I think that finding myself in an unknown country with unknown people was something that was hard to overcome. It was the same fear I always had, and I still feel like it affects me. If I am driving somewhere and I get lost, I start crying and I call my husband and he tells me to tell him the street I am on and he goes to where I am to get me back on the road and in the right direction. I feel panic because I don’t know where I am. My husband tells me that I have to pray and ask God to help me get over these fears. He reminds me that if I get lost, nothing will happen. I think it is all a part of how I grew up.”

Amanda grew up under the care of her strict grandmother and amidst the violence and oppression of the Salvadoran Civil War. These factors led to long-term consequences for her that still affects certain aspects of her daily life. We often take for granted being able to accomplish seemingly simple and effortless activities like driving to a destination, without panicking. However, for people like Amanda, certain day-to-day tasks can become the source of so much anxiety, which is exacerbated by the fear and worry she once felt back home during a time when she was constantly surrounded by danger.

Discrimination

Racial discrimination is another stressor that most of the women I interviewed seemed to be directly or indirectly affected by. Ana said that she has noticed discrimination against Hispanics in the workplace. She shared that even if Hispanic immigrants possess the skills needed for specific jobs, they are sometimes denied the opportunity of employment because “they are not of a certain skin color”, so those positions are given to native born workers instead. Ana’s comment closely relates to the information presented by Price (2012) regarding discrimination against Hispanic immigrants in the workforce. Olivia said she has felt discriminated against at doctors’ offices when employees point out that she does not know how to speak English. Emilia stated that she has seen people laugh at her when she tries to speak

English because of her accent. The day she took her road test, the driving instructor told Emilia that although she had passed the test, she should go learn how to speak English instead.

Amanda also thoroughly described a specific occasion when she was a victim of discrimination. She said:

“The lady helping me at the doctor’s office was Hispanic and she spoke both English and Spanish. There was this one word she said in English that I did not understand so I asked her if she could repeat the word in Spanish, but she yelled at me and said that it was not her fault that I did not go to school to learn English and that it was not her job to translate for me. I went to tell someone else who worked at the office about what she told me. I then explained the situation to the manager, who could not believe this had happened. When they spoke to the woman who had yelled at me, she admitted what she had done and said that she did it because it bothered her that I did not understand English.”

What is particularly salient about Amanda’s anecdote is that the woman who put her in such an uncomfortable situation was Hispanic herself. Some Hispanic immigrants or American-born children of Hispanic immigrants identify more with American culture. Therefore, in situations like the one Amanda described, these people may lose sight of their origins, and make other Hispanics feel hurt along the way.

Immigration Status

Given the relationship between the United States government and Salvadoran immigrants that I described in my introduction, I wanted to research whether the women’s undocumented status made it more difficult for them to adjust to life in this country. Erica said that the process of becoming a legal resident took some time, during which she could not work. During that transition, she said she was worried because she did not know what was going to happen with her or her family, and the waiting process made her anxious. Isabel has had a work permit for almost two decades, but she told me she had trouble finding employment when she first came to this country because employers were reluctant to hire her due to her undocumented status. Goodman

et al. (2017) considered that difficulty finding stable employment is one of the greatest challenges associated with people's immigration status. Isabel said:

“It is not the same for someone who only has a work permit in the current political climate than it is for someone who became a resident and then a citizen because, as a citizen, you can vote. With no legal citizenship, you don't have a voice. Being a resident or a citizen also gives you better opportunities to go back to school.”

Similar to what Isabel shared, Amanda said, “If you are not legal, you don't have the right to access anything.” She also stated that those who were undocumented could only work jobs like babysitting and cleaning houses, and they could not even go to the DMV to obtain an identification card.

The lack of voice and rights that these two participants referred to drew a parallel with the silence that was institutionalized in El Salvador during the civil war. The women I interviewed immigrated to the United States with the hopes of being welcomed by a society that prioritizes self-expression and being able to stand up for oneself. However, this expectation did not become a reality for those who were not able to exercise their democratic right to vote, could not access certain services, or were unable to find stable employment solely on the basis of being undocumented.

Gender Roles in the Resettlement Process

As was made clear in my literature review, Salvadoran culture has traditionally been dominated by patriarchy. This is why I decided to ask my participants if being expected to fulfill particular gender roles as a Salvadoran woman added a level of difficulty as they adapted to life in the United States. To my surprise, the majority of the women I interviewed did not feel as though their gender hindered their ability to work and take care of their families. Erica tried to balance these duties by arranging her schedule so that she could have time to drop her children

off at the bus stop every morning, pick them up later in the day, and work while they were in school. Ana said that she is shocked to see how women are now able to drive, work in construction and other traditionally male-dominated jobs, and are trying harder to obtain higher level education. She said that she feels as though women's strict gender roles are being left in the past, and that it is important that women are able to rebuild both themselves and their families in case the male figure is no longer around at some point.

Isabel shared that once she moved to the United States, she focused on working and raising her children, but she felt as though the option to go back to school was not available since her responsibilities stopped her from doing so. Emilia's case did reflect the male dominance that often shaped what women could or could not do. She stated:

“I was the one who took care of the children and picked them up from school all the time. I had to do all the work around the house. I could not go out to work or practice speaking English with other people. My husband did not let me go out and do all these things. I was not able to face reality outside of my home, so when my husband passed, I did not know what to do.”

After feeling so controlled for such a long time, Emilia told me that she's now able to come home and run her household in whatever way she wishes to, without having to listen to constant orders.

Stereotypes

Given that some people in American society hold negative perceptions about Salvadorans, which Abrego (2017) discusses as a violent and dangerous characterization of Central Americans, I decided to ask my participants whether negative stereotypes about their nationality have complicated their experiences as immigrants. Amanda shared that when she has told some people where she is from, they start mentioning MS-13 and begin to say that gangs have only messed up the United States. She stated that sometimes, even Salvadorans themselves

make these comments, and that “Americans think we are all gang members.” Isabel expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “El Salvador is often spoken about in terms of violence, but we are not all the same.” She emphasized that not all Salvadorans are violent or capable of hurting people, and that many leave the country in search of something better, with no intentions of causing trouble. Isabel said that when Salvadorans set a good example, people notice it, and they realize that although there are poor living conditions in El Salvador, you are different from the stereotypical violent person.

Ana seemed a bit frustrated when she spoke about this topic. She said that before, being Salvadoran was something that you could be proud of because everyone knew that you were a hardworking person. While this fact remains, certain views regarding her nationality have been tainted because of gang-related activity. Ana said that movies depicting gangs have fueled these negative views, which Abrego (2017) mentioned in her literature. Olivia also shared her disappointment with the existence of gangs and their relationship to her country. From a personal standpoint, however, Olivia said that stereotypes have not directly affected her. She shared that despite her nationality, she was always appreciated by her employers, and her bosses treated her nicely because she is an educated and respectful woman.

Cultural Importance of Family and Acculturation

Since I was raised in a Salvadoran household where family cohesion was always prioritized, I wanted to take a look at whether my participants felt that specific family values helped them cope with their war trauma or had an effect on their migration experience. All of my participants said that their family has always been of utmost importance to them. Isabel shared that even though not all of her family lives in this country, knowing that she can communicate with them, despite the distance, makes her happy and brings her peace. Amanda stated that

although her family is small, her children and grandchildren mean the world to her. Since all of Amanda's family lives in the same house, there is a strong sense of unity among them as everyone sits down to eat dinner together and celebrates holidays or other special occasions in each other's company. Olivia was especially grateful for her family, given that in her older age, she appreciates that her children have taken care of her and not sent her to a nursing home.

Ana seemed especially grateful for her mother and expressed this view by saying:

"My mom was a humble woman who did not have a high education level, not because she did not want to, but because she did not have the option to stay in school. She was very smart and she was always with us, giving us the best she could. Whenever I studied, my mom would be there to make sure I did not fall asleep. She pushed me to do more with myself and constantly told me to learn new things."

The strong influence that one's maternal figure and family in general has in Salvadoran culture helps to deeply instill many traditional values among people. Emilia elaborated on how growing up with these traditional values made it harder for her to raise her children in a foreign country with a different culture. She said:

"Life here is much more liberal and in El Salvador, we show more respect for certain things. In El Salvador, you do not leave your parents' house when you turn 18 and you do not start driving at 16. My children adapted more to American culture but I was raised differently, so there has been a culture clash between us."

Emilia's response shows how migration has affected her role as a mother. Salvadoran culture tends to be very socially conservative, emphasizes the importance of obedience and respect, and is strongly influenced by religious values. Some Salvadoran mothers living in this country may, therefore, find it difficult to raise their children in the same way as they themselves were raised.

The "culture clash" that Emilia spoke about has played a role in the extent to which my participants have chosen to or refrained from acculturating to American culture. Amanda said that after living in this country for 27 years, she feels more connected to American customs. She

shared that having children in the United States changed everything for her, and she made it seem as though she felt obligated to adapt to this country's norms. Amanda told me that while she does clearly remember the Salvadoran culture she grew up in, she now identifies more as a member of American society.

The level of acculturation that Amanda expressed, however, was not shared by the majority of my participants. Isabel spoke about how despite the fact that she has lived in the United States for almost two decades, she misses her land, her country, and her food, which evokes feelings of sadness and melancholy within her. Emilia felt the same way, saying she feels the happiest when she visits El Salvador and spends months at a time with her family. She emphasized that she has never been able to fully fit into American society, and that she hopes to one day be able to return and spend her final days in her country.

Olivia also still feels more in touch with her Salvadoran roots, but she elaborated on how particular areas of her life were improved upon moving to the United States. She now has access to appliances she could never have afforded in El Salvador, like washing machines, rice cookers, blenders and coffee makers. Olivia said that these appliances have made her life more convenient since she no longer spends hours completing certain activities. American residents often take for granted being able to easily throw their dirty clothes in the washing machine or placing dirty plates in the dishwasher. In comparison to life in this country, domestic appliances are unattainable luxuries for most Salvadoran people living in widespread poverty. While my thesis has focused on the difficulties associated with migration, it is important to note that many of the women I interviewed have, in some aspects, attained an increased standard of living since moving to this country.

Do Your Memories from the War Still Affect Your Life Today?

After learning more about my participants' experiences during the Salvadoran Civil War and as immigrants in the United States, I concluded their interviews by asking them if and how what they lived through during the war still affects them. I noticed the most significant changes in my participants' demeanors before replying to this question, with some of them hesitating before answering, looking down at the floor as they spoke, or seeming sadder than they did during the earlier sections of their interview. Most of the women I interviewed, however, simultaneously showed a lot of interest in this question, which was evident in the length of their answers.

Isabel stressed throughout her response that the war is something you cannot erase from your mind. She said that while she has been able to overcome some of the emotions she felt during the war, her memories are always there. Isabel shared that there are times when she suddenly stops what she's doing and is reminded of specific events that took place during the war. She often wonders how her country would have been different if the war had not taken place, and that if the country's government would have cared more about its people, then maybe she would not have had to leave El Salvador. She even said that she could not eat meat for a long period after the war because of an incident when she was walking by and saw a pile of flesh and bones at a gas station.

Ana also spoke about the graphic images still ingrained in her mind from the conflict. She said that movies like *Voces Inocentes*, which is set during the Salvadoran Civil War, accurately depict what you saw and how you felt during the war. *Voces Inocentes* was also brought up in Emilia's response when she confessed that she has never been capable of watching the movie, which depicts one of the darkest times in her life. Thinking back on what she witnessed during

this time makes Ana feel impotent because of the country's inability to develop due to the conflict's subsequent destruction and because of the many brilliant minds killed during the war who would have otherwise contributed to improving El Salvador's living conditions.

Throughout her interview, Amanda reiterated that she cannot watch violent movies or scenes where someone is getting tortured because her heart begins to beat really fast. She said that her husband reminds her that violent films are fictitious, but that it's only like that for him because he didn't personally witness everything she did. She shared that she still remembers that some women were kidnapped during the war to cook for men and "do other things" for them, and they were never seen or heard from again. Amanda feels as though her memories have stopped her from returning to El Salvador for more than 10 years, and she said she's scared of traveling with her daughter because of the country's high rates of kidnapping and extortion. This apathy towards returning to her home country, because of everything she experienced throughout the war and due to El Salvador's current dangerous conditions, could explain why Amanda chose to acculturate more with the culture of the United States. Her decision to distance herself from her native culture is, according to Bulut et al. (2016), an important component when exploring how acculturation is connected to the health of Latino immigrants in general.

Erica mentioned that she does not feel well when she hears the word "war", and that when the Twin Towers fell, she felt like she was back in war-torn El Salvador. She also remembers her country's conflict whenever she hears news about shootings and murders. People often take for granted being able to live their lives without constantly being reminded of more than a decade of death and fear, but the six Salvadoran women I interviewed remind us of mental battles that many people endure.

V. Conclusion

My results illustrate that what my participants lived through during the Salvadoran Civil War still directly or indirectly affects them. Some of the women I interviewed admitted that they had buried these memories until speaking about them with me, which shows how they have coped with their painful experiences through methods of suppression. Many of the questions I asked required my participants to elaborate on sensitive subjects, and I did not expect everyone to be ready to share as much as they did. It is important to note, however, that the “scars of the civil war” (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 135) manifest themselves in different ways. For people like Olivia, it is evident that the fear and anxiety she faced during the war still affects her, even decades later, because she seemed much more quiet and reserved while speaking about these topics, in comparison to her usual outgoing demeanor.

The participants’ reluctance to openly discuss their memories and experiences outside of their interviews, or in Olivia’s case, to openly speak about what she dealt with even in an intimate setting like her personal interview, could be attributed to certain aspects of the cultural context in which the war took place. Salvadoran culture does not emphasize the importance of mental health or self-expression and in turn creates a continuous cycle of silence and oppression, which facilitated the state’s ability to maintain control during the war using tactics of fear and intimidation. Women were especially vulnerable to the emotional and mental consequences of these tactics given El Salvador’s patriarchal society, and many of them migrated to the United States with unresolved trauma. For people like Amanda, her anxiety is exacerbated during daily activities like driving, and for others like Emilia, living through the war, combined with the stressors of migration, resulted in her diagnosis of mental health illnesses.

My participants discussed how certain initial migration stressors affected them. They expressed that the language barrier and transitioning from working high-skilled jobs in their home country to finding employment in the low-skill sector in the United States has been a source of frustration for them. They also spoke about the fear that they felt as they learned to navigate a new and unknown country, and how they believe they have been discriminated against based on their physical appearances and difficulty speaking English. The women I interviewed also shared how their undocumented status has been an obstacle in their ability to find stable employment, voice their opinions through the American political system, and access particular services.

The women I interviewed expressed that stereotypes associated with their Salvadoran nationality have sometimes resulted in people insinuating a connection between them and criminal organizations. They also elaborated on how certain family values have either been a source of unity for them or contributed to their difficulty adapting to the culture of the United States. The majority of my participants still felt more connected to their Salvadoran roots, but one of my participants, Amanda, now feels a stronger sense of belonging to American culture. I believe that Amanda's decision to detach from her native culture was a result of her apparent indifference toward El Salvador, which could be explained by her experiences during the country's civil war and her fear of visiting her country due to its high crime rates. The women also thoroughly reflected on how their memories from the war still evoke feelings of sadness and fear for them.

Although some of the problems that the women I interviewed had dealt with after reaching the United States were similar to problems most immigrants deal with when arriving from a different culture and language area, they had been facing additional challenges due to

their experiences with war in their home country. When trauma of war is added to the general trauma of cultural shock and adjusting to a new reality with low incomes, in addition to struggling with the material and mental insecurities caused by a temporary immigration status, it can become too much to handle and people can feel overwhelmed to the extent that their mental health is in jeopardy. Although my research is based on a very limited sample of women who experienced the war in El Salvador and immigrated to the United States, my hope is that this preliminary work will be helpful to future research.

Understanding the cultural context of my participants' home country is necessary to ensure that American society can create a more inclusive environment for Salvadoran immigrants. I hope that my findings from this exploratory case study can serve as the basis for future studies with war survivors of diverse ideological and political backgrounds, which can offer deeper insight into how El Salvador's unique geographic and historical context influences the community of Salvadoran people in the United States. Both quantitative and qualitative studies can play a critical role in increasing awareness regarding the emotional and physical toll that war and migration takes on people.

Despite the many challenges the women I interviewed have faced, it is important to note that they have all been able to move forward with their lives in the United States. My participants seemed much more independent than I expected based on the literature I evaluated, which potentially suggests that the limitations imposed on women by a male-dominated society are slowly eroding. At a local level, Salvadorans contribute to Long Island's diverse culture with their traditions, values, celebrations, and by constantly projecting a resilient and persevering attitude. As a Salvadoran immigrant, I pride myself in seeing how my compatriots always remain together and overcome adversity. Behind this strong sense of hard work and community, which

Salvadoran immigrants maintain despite the difficulties of migration, are admirable people who survived the terrors of war, pushed through, and never gave up.

VI. Survey Instrument

1. How long have you lived on Long Island?
2. Did you move directly from El Salvador to Long Island? If not, where in the United States did you first live?
3. If you did live somewhere else in the United States before you lived on Long Island, how many years have you lived in the United States in total?
4. Are you a part of any religion? If so, which?
5. Were you raised in that religion? If not, were you raised in another religion?
6. What is your education level? How many years of education did you complete in El Salvador and what was the highest level you completed there?
7. What was your occupation in El Salvador? For how long did you work in that occupation? Did you have any other occupations?
8. Have you continued your education in the United States? If so, what is the highest education level you have completed here and how many years of education have you completed?
9. What is your occupation in this country? Have you had other occupations in this country? If so, which?
10. Were you in El Salvador for the entire length of the civil conflict? If not, how long were you in El Salvador while the war was taking place before emigrating? Did you go to another country first or directly to the US?
11. What memories do you have from the civil war? How did these memories make you feel then and now?
12. Did you participate directly in the war? If so, as a guerilla member or as a government soldier?
13. Did any of your relatives participate directly in the war? As guerilla members or as government soldiers?
14. Did you notice any differences in the experiences among the families of guerrilla fighters, government soldiers, and civilian families who did not directly participate in the conflict? If so, what were they?
15. Did religion play a role in your life during the war, whether personally or in the nearby community? If so, how?

16. After the war was over, did you face any difficulties when you tried to picture your future? If so, how did these difficulties affect other aspects of your life, such as how much motivation you felt to, for example, go to school or work?
17. Do you feel as though the culture you grew up in emphasized the importance of your mental health, taking into consideration the situations your country endured? If not, what aspects of your culture may have impeded this? Do you feel that the government did enough or anything at all to facilitate people's mental recovery after war?
18. Do you feel as if you've ever had access to a specific outlet or environment where you can openly speak about how the war made you feel and how it currently affects your life? If so, where have they been and with whom? If not, who do you wish would have helped?
19. Have you experienced symptoms of psychological distress after your exposure to war? If so, what have they been? If not, have you gotten better? If you have gotten better, what factors have facilitated your improvement?
20. Have you been diagnosed with any mental health illnesses in El Salvador or in the United States? If so, which mental illnesses?
21. If you have been diagnosed, have your mental illnesses worsened since you immigrated to the United States?
22. Have you had access to health care and mental health services in the United States? Do you feel that you have received sufficient treatment for your illnesses?
23. What were your reasons for immigrating to the United States? If so, what kind of services?
24. What are some difficulties you've experienced while adjusting to life in the United States? How have these made you feel?
25. Do you feel as though specific factors (living conditions, poverty, lack of stable employment) have made it more difficult for you to adjust to living in this country? If so, what have these factors been?
26. Do you feel that being a woman and being expected to fulfill certain gender roles as a Salvadoran woman have added a level of difficulty in the resettlement process for yourself and your family? If so, how?
27. Have you faced racial discrimination or been discriminated against because of your language since you moved to the US? If so, how would you describe this discrimination?

28. Do you feel that not having been granted refugee status or political asylum has limited your access to services like healthcare? If so, how has this made it more difficult for you to adjust to living in this country?
29. Do you feel that certain stereotypes associated with being a Salvadoran woman have made it harder to live as an immigrant in the United States? If so, how would you describe these stereotypes?
30. Do you think that certain traits of Salvadoran culture, like specific family values, have been reflected in how you and the women around you feel/cope with trauma? If so, which ones?
31. If you have had access to mental health services, do you feel as if their strategies have been both culturally and linguistically appropriate, taking into consideration all the traits of being a woman who belongs to Salvadoran culture?
32. Do you think your experiences/memories from the war still affect some, if not all, aspects of your life, now that you're living in another country? If so, how do these memories affect you?

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