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Central American immigrant mothers' narratives of intersecting oppressions: A resistant knowledge project

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Abstract

Objective: In partnership with Central American mothers, the objective of this study was to engage in the coproduction of a resistant knowledge project, delineating how racialized and gendered structural oppression in the context of illegality conditioned mothers' opportunities to work, live, and do family in an immigrant enclave in the Washington, D.C. region.

Background: While there is significant research describing Central American mother's experiences in the United States, it is critical to understand how interlocking structural oppressions operate in specific contexts to produce differential experiences of exploitation and marginalization.

Method: This study is embedded in a larger community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) program. For this study, we analyzed 22 in-depth interviews with undocumented Central American immigrant mothers using a community-engaged coding process.

Results: Findings illustrate how the interlocking forces of structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality deprive Central American immigrant mothers of economic and other resources, exposing them to precarious, overcrowded housing, and toxic, abusive power relations. These oppressive structural forces also position women as dependent on men and their wages. In solidarity with their male partners, some mothers reached their family goals through shared parental sacrifice. For others, partner deportations and relational dysfunction were ruinous. Some mothers saw their liberation from intersecting oppressions as tied to their singlehood.

Conclusion: Critical perspectives and alternative research approaches like CBPAR are needed in family science to advance understanding of how structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality condition and constrain the lives of Central American immigrant mothers and other minoritized and marginalized families. CBPAR can also contribute to social movements for justice and people's liberation.

KEYWORDS

community participation/action research, Hispanic/Latino/a, immigrants, marginalized, mothers, work-family issues

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, Terry Repak's *Waiting on Washington* documented the unusual predominance of Salvadoran women among undocumented Central American immigrants settling in the Washington, D.C. region in the 1960s and 1970s. These migration "pioneers," she wrote, were recruited by "Washington's diplomatic, international, and professional workforce…to work for them as housekeepers and child care providers" (p. 2). Repak (1995) and others (e.g., Menjívar et al., 2020; Molina, 2008) also chronicled the legal limbo or liminality endured by Central American immigrants who, fleeing civil war in the 1980s and, later, natural disasters and gang violence, were repeatedly denied opportunities to regularize their legal status and reunite with family. Today, Central American women and their families are *still* waiting on Washington for the legal reforms needed to redress the "permanent temporariness" of legal uncertainty (A. J. Bailey et al., 2002, p. 138) and undocumented statuses that constrain mothers' adaptation, social mobility, and their liberation or freedom from oppression (Abrego, 2014; Abrego & Lakhani, 2015).

The current study takes place less than 10 miles from Washington, D.C. in a Central American immigrant enclave in Northern Virginia known as *Chirilagua*. In the late 1980s, this neighborhood became home to a sizable number of Salvadoran immigrants, who nicknamed the enclave after a town in El Salvador from which many had fled (Moon, 2019). Journalistic accounts of Chirilagua at the time paint a picture of immigrant families crowding into privately-owned, low-rent apartments where the dilapidated buildings "were known for cockroaches inside and drug dealers outside" (Pan, 1999, p. A1). Yet, historical accounts also capture an agentic community that, led by a multiracial coalition of Central American and Black residents, organized against mass evictions to save their homes (Molina, 2008; Moshenberg, 2006).

The complexity and dynamism of place continues to be evidenced in the Chirilagua neighborhood, where undocumented Central American immigrant mothers live in the context of "illegality." Immigration scholars describe "illegality" as a racialized and gendered national project to target, detain, and deport immigrants, and especially men racialized as Brown, from Mexico and Central America (De Genova & Peutz, 2010; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). While this national anti-immigrant project, hardened by the Trump Administration (Pierce et al., 2018), primarily targets men for removal, it also threatens and constrains women to differential effect. When illegality is intersected with other axes of oppression, namely, structural racism and heteropatriarchy, these structural forces can condition Central American mothers' ability to generate economic resources and supports, access quality housing, and do family as they desire. Racialized and gendered illegality can also expose mothers and their children to toxic relationships, predation, and other harms to their health (Abrego, 2014; Asad & Clair, 2018; Del Real, 2019; Enriquez, 2015; Logan et al., 2021; Parrado et al., 2005).

While there is a significant body of research documenting the lived experiences of Central American mothers in the context of illegality (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Menjívar, 1999;

Molina, 2008), Abrego and Schmalzbauer (2018) recently called for new research that delineates immigrant family experiences by place to capture the "varying experiences of exploitation and constrained agency centered often on motherhood" (p. 10). To answer the call, we examined how oppressive forces operated in the lives of Central American immigrant mothers rearing children in the shadow of the nation's capital. Specifically, we asked: How do structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality condition and constrain how Central American immigrant mothers work, live, and do family in an immigrant enclave known as Chirilagua? To carry out this work, we used a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach.

Using a CBPAR approach to build a resistant knowledge project

CBPAR is uniquely suited to engage immigrants and other minoritized and marginalized communities in research (Vaughn et al., 2016). CBPAR is premised on the assertion that research *with* (and not on) people is critical to their liberation (Fals Borda, 2001; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Using CBPAR approaches, researchers work to *blur the lines* and *disrupt power hierarchies* between university researchers and research participants such that the collective becomes coproducers of research *for the direct benefit of the community* (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Essential to CBPAR is the establishment of trust, shared power, and a collaborative spirit that engenders researcher humility and democratic engagement (Wallerstein et al., 2018). CBPAR approaches should engage the community in all phases of research and university researchers should engage in community-led action to improve people's lives (Vaughn et al., 2016).

Using a CBPAR approach, in 2014, university researchers partnered with Central American immigrant mothers to establish what Collins (2019) calls a "resistant knowledge project" (p. 11). A resistant knowledge project is led by people "penalized by colonialism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and similar systems of power" whose "experiences with oppression are often the catalyst for critically analyzing these systems and taking action within them" (Collins, 2019, p.12). To build this project, we formed *Amigas de la Comunidad* (Friends of the Community), a community advisory board (CAB) initially made up of 10 Central American immigrant mothers. Two trusted bilingual staff members from local immigrant-serving organizations recruited the original CAB members and provided essential supports to convene the CAB. Although the CAB membership has changed over the years, our core group, including five CAB members, has met nearly every month since project inception to generate the research, analyze the data, and interpret the findings of the resistant knowledge project we present here. The critical social theory known as intersectionality guided and informed our work (Collins, 2019).

Intersecting oppressions: structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality

Intersectionality is a form of critical inquiry and praxis that locates individuals and families within a matrix of domination, where interlinked inequalities caused by colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism are maintained at a structural level to perpetuate White supremacy (Collins, 1990, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014). As Walsdorf et al. (2020) asserted, the United States was built upon a foundation of White supremacy, in which a racialized and gendered system of domination, developed of, by, and for White male property owners, serves to maintain their power over others. Central pillars undergirding White supremacy are structural racism and heteropatriarchy, in which racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy (or male domination) have been codified into mutually reinforcing laws, policies, rules, regulations, and practices daily enacted in the United States (Z. D. Bailey et al., 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Letiecq, 2019; Smith, 2016).

A critical examination of family production and outcomes in U.S. society reveals how structural racism and heteropatriarchy intersect to create, valorize as best, and structurally privilege White, middle-class, heterosexual, male-breadwinner, female-caregiver, nuclear families to the disadvantage of others (e.g., Collins, 1998; Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Letiecq, 2019). This privileging of one family form *by law, policy, and practice* conditions family functioning in the United States in racialized and gendered ways. It places caregiving responsibilities squarely on the shoulders of mothers and then differentially conditions mothers' labor market participation as a function of gender and race (Flippen & Parrado, 2015; Folbre, 2021). To perpetuate White heteropatriarchal family supremacy, the United States has also engaged in the systematic denigration, dehumanization, and marginalization of minoritized and racialized families, including immigrant and single-mother headed families, to devastating effect (e.g., Z. D. Bailey et al., 2021; Collins, 2019; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Smith, 2016). These acts of White supremacy were and continue to be state-sanctioned (Letiecq, 2019; Walsdorf et al., 2020).

Under this oppressive system, "illegality" has also become an axis of stratification, conditioning family experiences based on legal statuses and deportability (Menjívar, 2021). In the United States, immigration laws and policies produce complex rewards and penalties based on legal status that expose undocumented immigrants to exploitation, criminalization, deportation, and family separation (Abrego et al., 2017; Menjívar & Kantsroom, 2014). These policies (e.g., Temporary Protected Status [TPS]) also create hierarchies of legality and mixed statuses within families (Del Real, 2019). Mixed status families are formed when one partner or child cannot regularize their status under U.S. law or when a child is born in the United States to undocumented immigrant parents (Menjívar et al., 2016). TPS, which grants eligible immigrants temporary and conditional authorization to live and work in the United States, is particularly relevant to this study (Menjívar et al., 2020). The majority of TPS holders are Salvadoran and Honduran, and many live in the Washington, D.C. region (Adams, 2021). TPS holders are also disproportionately men (Adams, 2021). Undocumented Central American immigrant mothers who are ineligible for TPS have few to no other pathways to regularize their status, creating gendered hierarchies of legality and differential vulnerabilities within families (Menjívar et al., 2016). Thus, mixed statuses can contribute to unequal and abusive family relations (Del Real, 2019; Parrado et al., 2005). Constructed hierarchies can also result in what Enriquez (2015) called "multigenerational punishment" because mothers' undocumented or liminal status can condition their uptake of resources on behalf of their children, exposing family systems to economic marginalization.

U.S. immigration laws and policies, when coupled with family- and health-related policies, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), further shape and constrain immigrant family experiences (Menjívar et al., 2016). PRWORA, ACA, and a host of other U.S. laws and policies render undocumented immigrants ineligible for most federal benefits and social services including Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Social Security Income, food stamps, housing assistance, nonemergency Medicaid, Medicare, and health insurance through ACA exchanges (and limits access among those with legal authorization as well; Menjívar et al., 2016; Vesely, Bravo, & Guzzardo, 2019). Curtailing access to social welfare benefits and health care has deleterious effects on immigrant family well-being across the life span (Vesely, Bravo, & Guzzardo, 2019).

The intersecting oppressive forces of structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality can manifest and function differently by people, across different family configurations, and by place, creating heterogeneity of experiences within immigrant groups and within immigrant enclaves that demand context-specific critical inquiry (Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2018; Menjívar et al., 2016). In this study, we analyzed Central American immigrant mothers' narratives to delineate how racialized and gendered illegality conditioned and constrained their opportunity structure, family functioning, and liberation in a Northern Virginia enclave called Chirilagua.

Not welcome, not valued: Central American immigrant mothers in the United States

Between 1980 and 2015, it is estimated that 3.4 million Central Americans immigrated to the United States and continue to do so in large numbers (Lesser & Batalova, 2017; Meyer & Taft-Morales, 2019). Perhaps because of early Salvadoran pioneering women who settled in the Washington, D.C. region (Repak, 1995), Virginia is a high receiving state and Northern Virginia enclaves like Chirilagua continue to be a destination for Central Americans (Migration Policy Institute's Data Hub, 2019; Moon, 2019). Without legal authorization to enter the United States, many Central American immigrant women have endured significant violence, threats, extortion, bodily harms, and psychological traumas during brutal journeys northward (Goodman et al., 2017; Kaltman et al., 2011; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Torres et al., 2018). As Abrego (2014) concluded, mothers' journeys are reminders that "they are not welcome and not valued as human beings" (p. 67). She wrote further that "the implications of illegality while en route" to the United States were replaced by "the implications of illegality within the U.S. borders" (Abrego, 2014, p. 67).

Working, living, and doing family under the weight of oppression

Once in the United States, structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality form an interlocking web of laws, policies, and practices that shape and constrain Central American immigrant mothers' opportunities, life chances, and family experiences (Menjívar, 2021). Due to structural oppression, Central American immigrant mothers are made vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization in both the labor and housing markets—two structures that are vital to family production and outcomes (Rogers & Winkler, 2013).

In the labor market, racialized and gendered illegality renders undocumented Central American immigrant mothers particularly limited in their employment opportunities and the wages they can generate while also assuming primary care of their children (Abrego, 2014; Menjívar, 1999). Undocumented immigrant mothers in the Washington, D.C. region typically are relegated to a handful of low-paying, physically demanding, unbenefited and unprotected jobs in the cleaning, food services, and child care sectors (Adams, 2021; Woolf et al., 2017). The working conditions created by racialized and gendered illegality can expose mothers to sexual harassment and assault, discrimination, and wage theft (National Women's Law Center, 2014). Undocumented immigrant mothers may endure these workplace abuses for fear of retaliation, including threats of deportation (National Women's Law Center, 2014). Labor market exploitation also positions undocumented immigrant mothers as dependent on men (and their wages) in heterosexual unions, rendering mothers vulnerable to both workplace and relational abuses (Del Real, 2019; Menjívar et al., 2016; Parrado et al., 2005; Pinto & Ortiz, 2018). Context-specific critical inquiry is needed to more fully understand how economic marginalization and exploitation condition and constrain the agency of Central American immigrant mothers "doing family" in the D.C. region.

Racialized and gendered illegality also can condition and constrain where and how undocumented mothers live. The history of racialized housing segregation in the United States is well-documented (e.g., Massey & Denton, 1993), and immigrant hypersegregated neighborhoods continue to be reproduced in the Washington, D.C. region (Hyra, 2017; Massey, 2016; Rothstein, 2017; Woolf, 2021). Scholars have documented gentrification, racial segregation, poor housing conditions, and overcrowding occurring in the Chirilagua neighborhood specifically (Moon, 2019; Woolf et al., 2017). The dilapidated buildings described in journalistic accounts in the 1990s have changed little (Pan, 1999), exposing many undocumented Central American mothers and their families to mold, mildew, rodents, poor management, and toxic

stress (Letiecq et al., 2019). Living in overcrowded circumstances likely constrains undocumented immigrant mothers' functioning and their ability to meet familial needs, yet little is known about familial functioning within housing systems built upon structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality.

Researchers have begun to document how the racialized and gendered context of illegality requires undocumented Latinx immigrant mothers to vigilantly monitor immigration policies and their enforcement under different regimes (Pierce et al., 2018) and adapt or shift their family functioning, often without the kinds of network supports they had back home (Abrego, 2014; Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2018; Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Vesely, Letiecq, & Goodman, 2019). Menjívar et al. (2016) noted that, while gendered expectations of mothers are significantly transformed in the process of migration, changes "do not always occur in the direction of equality" (p. 80). Indeed, in her study of Salvadoran immigrant mothers in San Francisco, Menjívar (1999) found that even when women contributed economically to the family—and sometimes earned more than male partners—the gendered division of labor at home did not become more egalitarian because women did not want to challenge perceptions of men's patriarchal authority. Mothers' family configurations, whether living in a two-parent mixed status family or rearing children as a single mother or transnationally, also can introduce complexity to the ways undocumented mothers navigate and negotiate the oppressive forces that structure their lives (e.g., Abrego, 2014; Vesely, Letiecq, & Goodman, 2019). To add to this critical discourse, in this study, the following research question was interrogated: How do structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality condition and constrain how undocumented Central American immigrant mothers work, live, and do family in a Northern Virginia enclave called Chirilagua?

METHODS

Data collection

The current study was approved by our institution's human subjects review board. We also hold a National Institutes of Health Certificate of Confidentiality. Early in our CBPAR efforts in 2014–2015, we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 undocumented Central American immigrant mothers in Spanish to describe their immigration stories and lived experiences residing in Chirilagua. Interviews were conducted by one member of the university research team (first author, White, female, English proficient, some Spanish) and a CAB member (sixth author, Salvadoran, female, proficient in English and Spanish). These interviews informed the development and implementation of an interviewer-assisted survey conducted in the same immigrant enclave between 2015 and 2017 ($N = 134$). To delve deeper into the intersections of structural oppression and familial functioning, the same two interviewers conducted additional interviews in 2016–2017 with 12 more participants, focusing more pointedly than in the first set of interviews on employment, housing, and family life. We ceased conducting interviews when we were no longer hearing new information and reached saturation (Glesne, 2015).

Interview protocols were codeveloped by the CAB, which consisted of 10 women at the beginning of the project in 2014. Over the course of the study, CAB membership was in flux, with some original members stepping off the board for various reasons (relocation, time demands) and others joining. By the end of data collection in 2017, the CAB consisted of five Latina immigrants (three were original members and all lived in the enclave). All participants engaged in our CBPAR project were recruited by trained CAB members who were compensated for their efforts. Participants were orally consented to participate, and offered $25 gift cards for participation. Interviews took 60–120 min and were conducted in mothers' apartments (often a bedroom) or at another location (e.g., restaurant, park). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in Spanish with English translations included, and checked for accuracy.

Participants

Of the 22 participants, nearly all were from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and the one participant born in Belize grew up in Guatemala. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 45 years, completed an average of 8.36 years of formal schooling (education ranged from 0 to 14 years), and lived in the United States from 3 months to 24 years (with an average of 10.3 years of U.S. residence). Most participants were married or partnered (81.8%); however, two women were separated from their partners due to detainment and deportation. Thus, a total of six women were single parenting at the time of the study. Participants had from 1 to 5 children. While all mothers were rearing at least one child in the United States, 5 mothers were separated from children living in their country of origin. Three mothers crossed the U.S. border with their children. Demographics and immigration experiences were comparable across the first and second sets of interviews. All but two women from the total study sample of 22 also participated in the survey protocol (Letiecq et al., 2019). Demographic details of in-depth interview and survey participants are presented in Table 1. While we present some descriptive data in the findings based on survey results ($N = 134$), the primary data source for this study were in-depth interviews ($N = 22$).

Data analysis and data quality

Consonant with principles of CBPAR (Wallerstein et al., 2018), we analyzed the qualitative interview data in collaboration with the CAB. While in the field, we engaged in informal analyses as interviewers reflected on the interviews and wrote field notes (Maxwell, 2012). Using Dedoose, a qualitative data management software, our formal analyses were conducted in three waves of coding with five CAB members (see Vesely, Letiecq, Goodman, Marquez, et al., 2019). During open coding, we met with the CAB twice for roughly 2 h each in a meeting room offered by a local immigrant-serving nonprofit organization embedded in the community. English components of transcripts were used by research team members who were not fluent in Spanish; Spanish components were used by CAB members. Bilingual research team members worked across English and Spanish transcripts, supporting dialogs between university monolingual English speakers and CAB monolingual Spanish speakers, to ensure accurate translation and interpretation of data in both forward and back translation (McKenna, 2022; Santos et al., 2015).

Together, we reviewed 3 transcripts and developed approximately 30 codes with Spanish and English equivalents. After developing the coding scheme, the university team worked in pairs, inclusive of bilingual research assistants, to open code all of the transcripts in English. The university team checked in with the CAB by spot-checking multiple coded passages across the data to ensure codes were being applied to the data accurately across languages (Santos et al., 2015). When there were disagreements across coders, we worked during CAB meetings to reach agreements. Next, we moved into axial coding to create categories that we examined across all participants to understand the range of mothers' paid work, housing, and familial experiences. Finally, we met with the CAB several times during selective coding, gathering at a local cafe and more recently meeting online via Zoom to ensure our interpretations were correct as we developed connections among categories to tell participants' stories (LaRossa, 2005). It was during these CAB meetings that the collective determined the themes and stories to include in this paper. CAB members were paid $25 per hour for their coding work.

Multiple strategies were used to ensure data quality and accuracy. At the completion of the second set of interviews, the university team had been in the community for 4 years, and at the time of data analysis, we had been in the community for 6 years. Through this long-term engagement, we built trust and rapport with CAB and community members and co-organized

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of Central American immigrant mothers: Total survey sample and interview subsample

Characteristic	Survey sample ($N = 134$) *n* (%) or *M* (*SD*)	Interview subsample ($N = 22$) *n* (%) or *M* (*SD*)	Subsample range
Country of origin (COO)			
El Salvador	62 (46.3%)	8 (36.4%)	
Honduras	44 (32.8%)	6 (27.3%)	
Guatemala	25 (18.7%)	7 (31.8%)	
Other	3 (2.2%)	1 (4.5%)	
Age	34.63 (7.35)	34.27 (5.05)	23–45 years
Education (in years)	7.43 (4.35)	8.36 (4.04)	0–14 years
Years in the U.S.	10.24 (5.36)	10.30 (5.66)	3 months–24 years
Relationship status			
Single	36 (26.9%)	4 (18.2%)	
Married	33 (25.2%)[a]	6 (27.3%)	
Partnered (compañero)	62 (47.3%)[a]	12 (54.5%)	
Years in partnership	9.95 (6.31)	10.00 (5.23)	2–20 years
Number of children	2.65 (1.23)	2.45 (0.96)	1–5 children
Work for pay (% yes)	75 (56.4%)	13 (59.1%)	
Type of paid work			
Caregiving	12 (16.0%)	3 (23.1%)	
Cleaning Industry	26 (34.7%)	3 (23.1%)	
Restaurant/food industry	27 (36.0%)	7 (53.8%)	
Other	10 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)	
Housing			
Live in apartment	121 (90.3%)	20 (90.9%)	
Number of bedrooms	1.65 (0.87)	2.0 (1.08)[b]	0–4
Total adults/children per unit	5.62 (2.16)	6.3 (2.47)[b]	3–10
Person to bedroom ratio	3.89 (1.65)	3.68 (1.96)[b]	1.5–8
Worried about food security (% yes)	108 (80.6%)	14 (70.0%)[b]	
Deportation worry (% yes)	108 (80.6%)	17 (77.3%)	

[a]Three missing cases; $n = 131$.
[b]Two mothers who were interviewed for this study provided demographic information but did not complete the full survey; $n = 20$.

events with established, immigrant-serving community organizations and local agencies. Holding monthly CAB meetings and participating regularly in community events provided multiple instances for observations and CBPAR collaborations. Following coanalyses of our larger survey, the CAB held a community meeting and gallery walk to present findings. After the presentation, attendees discussed research-informed action steps, including the community's need for assistance completing school forms. The CAB and university team then partnered with the local public school system to host a registration event in the neighborhood to support families in registering their children for school. Over the years, the CAB has also hosted several Know Your Rights legal clinics and health clinics offered in partnership with other nonprofit organizations. These events provided the university team with opportunities to build trusted relationships and gain greater understanding of immigrant family life in the Chirilagua enclave while taking action in the community—all essential components of CBPAR praxis (Wallerstein et al., 2018).

Reflexive conversations with the CAB throughout the project and especially during data analyses also deepened and extended our understanding of these data (Glesne, 2015).

FINDINGS

Using a community-based data analytic strategy and a critical lens, our resistant knowledge project yielded three themes interlinking racialized and gendered illegality and mothers' working, living, and familial experiences. Findings illustrated how structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality not only deprived immigrant mothers and their children of critical resources and adequate housing, but also exposed them to toxic, abusive power relations at work, at home, and in the neighborhood. Oppressive forces also conditioned and constrained women's roles in their families, positioning women as dependent on men and their wages. Some mothers, in solidarity with their partners, were able to reach their family goals. For others, partner deportations and relational dysfunction were ruinous, leading some mothers to envision their liberation as interlinked with their singlehood. Pseudonyms were used throughout the findings.

Oppressive working conditions and exposures to abuse

Among undocumented Central American immigrant mothers who participated in this study, nearly 60% (4 out of 6 single mothers and 10 out of 16 partnered mothers) were working for pay most frequently in the restaurant/food service (53.8%), cleaning (23.1%), or caregiving (23.1%) sectors. In her 1995 study, Repak found that Central American immigrant women in the Washington, D.C. region worked in similar sectors and earned mean wages of $4.00 to $7.45 per hour. Some 25 years later, undocumented mothers living in the Chirilagua neighborhood reported earning from $5.00 to $12.00 per hour, reflecting persistently low wages in an area where the cost of living has increased by roughly 80% over that time period (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2021). To further contextualize mothers' deep economic marginalization, in 2019, median gross rent in the region was $1881, median home values were $563,100, and median household income was $124,831 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). At $8 per hour, mothers working full-time grossed $1386 per month, nowhere near enough to cover rent and basic necessities. The Center for Women's Welfare (2021) estimates that a parent with a preschooler living in the region today would need to earn a minimum of $37.46 per hour to be self-sufficient.

During interviews, mothers were keenly aware of how their employment opportunities were constrained at the intersections of structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality. As one mother who was searching for employment shared: "Because imagine, nowadays you go look for a job [and] they say, 'Do you have papers? Do you know English?'" Victoria, a Guatemalan mother of three children, reflected on her gendered experience, stating: "[Y]ou see that as women they do not pay us very well…Everything ends up in babysitting." Participants discussed feeling like they had no choice but to accept the limited economic opportunities available to them because of their legal status, limited English language skills, and childcare needs. Many echoed what Gabriela, a 34-year-old mother, shared about her working conditions: "Since I do not have papers or [have not] studied, I have to conform with whatever I find."

For many, working in the labor market meant securing childcare, especially for their youngest children, that was affordable, of high quality, safe, and—critically—aligned with mothers' work schedules. Yet this was hard to cobble together. Some mothers were unaware of or fearful to take up formal child care offerings given their mixed family statuses and fears of state-sanctioned family separation. Some mothers who did trust public preschool programs like Head Start, faced waitlists or their children were not yet age-eligible for this public option. Due to their legal status, mothers were ineligible for child care subsidies to secure private high-quality

center-based care. And some mothers worked overnight which further limited child care options. These complex and misaligned childcare circumstances led many mothers to rely on informal "neighbor" care. Yet this this form of care was risky because it was unregulated and could expose their children to abuse and unsafe conditions.

For example, Manuela, from Guatemala, shared how she found her 3-year-old son crying and "all wet" when she picked him up from a neighbor's care after she got off from work:

> I asked the lady, 'What happened?' She said, 'He is not my son.' But I was paying her. [The lady said,] 'He is not my son for me to be taking care of him.' So…I sat him [my son] down. And I asked him what was happening to him. To trust me, that if anything I can defend him. That is when he told me that the lady was spanking him.

Like Manuela, many mothers who were desperate to earn a living and in need of child care experienced an impossible bind, leaving them to question who they could trust to take care of their children and how they could best protect them, especially when their low wages and nonstandard work hours rendered other forms of child care (e.g., center-based care) out of reach.

Predatory power relations and family threats

This racialized and gendered context of illegality not only placed children at risk of harms, but also exposed mothers to workplace abuses, predation, and threats of deportation and family separation—often meted out by other Latinx people. These working conditions and community betrayals required mothers to be vigilant and planful, bearing abuses to protect their families while they worked to secure a better future for their children. Ariana's experience was illustrative. As a mother of three young children, Ariana described how her work experience in food services was dehumanizing, economically marginalizing, and threatening to her family:

> Others that know we are not from this country, that for $8 we will work in whatever. That they put us to do jobs that we should not be doing sometimes for $8… They see you as less…[and] you allow that to happen because you have no papers. The fear is that they will get immigration on you and send you over there. And you think about your children…God forbid, better to bear it.

According to CAB members, Ariana's story captured the toxic, predatory power relations that mothers in this study often encountered in the labor market. Her narrative also exposed who was threatening to expose undocumented mothers on the job to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), deportation, and family separation. Across interviews, it became clear that most threats were coming from other Latinx people who either were U.S. citizens or had legal authorization (e.g., TPS) to live and work in the United States.

Catalina, a 39-year-old mother from El Salvador, further discussed this abusive power dynamic. Catalina's husband worked in construction and she in cleaning. She worked four days a week, 8 h a day, and earned around $8 per hour. Her husband was a TPS holder, but she was not eligible for the protected status. And she felt trapped. Catalina was fearful that applying to regularize her status would lead to deportation, but not having papers rendered her vulnerable to mistreatment and threats at work. She shared:

> When you don't have [papers] you are mistreated at work. Because yes I, I am working…but there is a person like she knows how I am…she pressures me and sometimes she makes me do things that are not suitable for you. And they do it because they have their papers. They say, 'well, this one won't leave from here, this

> one will bear everything here because she doesn't know where to go.' And I have seen that in that these people take advantage. I have lived it. I have lived it.

Like other participants, Catalina described a hierarchical structure and an often abusive power imbalance at work where those with work authorization are at the top of the hierarchy and those without papers are at the bottom. Discussing her supervisor, Catalina shared further:

> She is from Guatemala and obtained papers through domestic violence. She is a citizen, she knows how to speak English very well, she drives, has everything and she discriminates [against] the Hispanic people, she discriminates… She [asks] 'what are they doing here in this country if they don't have papers?' She came the same way, but she never accepts it.

While not all participants discussed experiences of mistreatment and family threats at work, throughout the study, many stories of betrayal committed by community members were shared. Study participants described a pervasive mistrust within the community rather than a sense of collective solidarity thought to be endemic in immigrant enclaves. According to CAB members, sharing a Central American immigrant identity did not guarantee common cause, protect undocumented women from predation or threats of family separation, or protect their children from abuses. Indeed, structural oppression was often enacted and enforced by other Latinx people who had more positional power than undocumented mothers. Ariana, interlinking exploitation, illegality, and hopes for her children, understood this phenomenon:

> I see my children in 20 years being professionals…with their own businesses. Not being workers for anyone. I want to see them being bosses. That is why I work hard…But not being employees because they are exploited. When you are illegal, they exploit you, because if you do not have papers, you do not have rights.

These findings illustrated how the oppressive forces at play not only constrained and economically marginalized undocumented Central American immigrant mothers, but also exposed both mothers and children to toxic, abusive power relations within the community (Logan et al., 2021). In response, mothers like Ariana worked to protect their children while playing the long game, personally enduring abuses now in hopes of positioning their children higher up in the power hierarchy in the future. The harmful effects of racialized and gendered illegality evident in the labor market also showed up in the housing market where mothers lived.

Precarious housing conditions: living with strangers

From the 1980s, when Central American immigrants began moving into Chirilagua, to the present, living conditions in the neighborhood have been characterized as "poor," "dilapidated," and "overcrowded" (Moon, 2019). Indeed, the majority of mothers in this study reported *living with strangers* in precarious housing circumstances. Among the 22 participants interviewed, 16 reported living with between 4 and 13 people—including unrelated others—in 1–4 bedroom apartments. Most lived in one to two bedroom units with five to eight people per unit and a mean of 3.68 (SD = 1.96) adults and children per bedroom. Data from the larger survey of 134 immigrant mothers revealed similar living conditions, with on average 3.89 (SD = 1.65) individuals per bedroom (see Table 1). Survey participants also reported poor living conditions,

such as problems with mice (50.4%), cockroaches (62.4%), bed bug infestations (36.8%), and maintenance upkeep (e.g., peeling paint, broken appliances; 42.9%; Letiecq et al., 2019).

As was observed during in-depth interviews in participants' apartments, typically one family resided in one bedroom and another unrelated individual or family took up the second bedroom or converted the living room or a closet to sleeping quarters. Housing arrangements were typically managed by a leaseholder who rented out rooms within the unit to other individuals and families. When a leaseholder sublet their unit, they determined which rooms individuals and families could occupy, how much rent to charge, and when occupants could use common areas like kitchens and bathrooms. Leaseholders could evict subletters without notice or legal recourse, creating stressful, unstable, and unsettling living circumstances. As with mothers' experiences in the labor market, findings show how these shared housing arrangements in the context of racialized and gendered illegality also fomented unequal power relations and family threats, rendering undocumented Central American immigrant women subletters particularly vulnerable to the dictates of leaseholders. Like some employers in the labor market, predatory and abusive leaseholders were often members of the Latinx community.

Unequal power dynamics and constrained family functioning

These housing power dynamics that constrained and conditioned mothers' familial experiences were exemplified by Alejandra's story. A Salvadoran mother who arrived in the United States 3 months before our interview, Alejandra described renting the bedroom of a one-bedroom, one-bath unit with her husband and two boys (ages 3 and 6) for $650 per month. The leaseholder, his wife and their two daughters (ages 9 and 13) took up the living room as their living quarters. Alejandra shared that she and her children often got "trapped" in the bedroom because she was told not to disturb the leaseholder's family while they were sleeping (even if during the day), which constrained movement and entering/exiting the unit. She shared, "They [her children] can't be in the living room in the morning because he [leaseholder] gets up at 10… sometimes he leaves at 11…And they [her children] want to get up and be in the living room, but the way we live, they can't." Contrasting the limited space to play and be childlike to her family's experience in El Salvador, Alejandra said, "Over there they played, they sang, they did everything…They were free…and here it is very different."

Common among interviewees who were subletters in this study, Alejandra went on to describe how the leaseholder family also limited her access to common spaces, constraining her ability to meet the basic needs of her family. Regarding kitchen access, she said: "Yes, when the woman [leaseholder's spouse] is there, I do not cook. When she is in the kitchen, I have to wait. I have to wait because both of us can't be there because the kitchen is too small." When asked about space for food storage, she said the leaseholder gave her "a bit of space…They do give us a very small space in the fridge." Alejandra noted that the other family "has more things. So they leave us a very small section." She shared, "I always leave the fruits outside [the refrigerator] but the problem is there are those cockroaches there…I don't like it but…there is no space."

Participants in this study shared that they would like to change their living circumstances if they could. This finding was consistent with mothers' responses to the larger survey, where nearly 80% of 134 respondents affirmed a desire to improve their housing conditions (Letiecq et al., 2019). But Alejandra's narrative suggests that her desire to move was also connected to her desire to get out from under the abusive power dynamics that constrained her family life and felt threatening. Yet, as with so many participants, she felt stuck. Here she described keeping tight controls on her sons and negotiating space to avoid upsetting the leaseholder and getting evicted:

> Well yes, we try to [not provoke the leaseholder family] because right now we do not have another option. Like the father of my children says, 'If they tell us to leave

> from there then we have to see what to do.' Because sometimes they do not like for our children to bother them too much…sometimes the girls get mad at them…They [our children] do not like it much, but we don't have any other place to live right now.

Living with kin did not necessarily result in better housing circumstances, as Camila's story suggested. A 32-year-old mother from El Salvador, Camila lived with her three children and her husband in a shared housing arrangement with her sister, who was the leaseholder. The living arrangement was strained, with her sister often criticizing Camila's young son and suggesting the family move out any time there was a disagreement. Camila described the difficulties this caused for her and her partner and the ways they discussed moving forward, sharing, "He would tell me that he felt bad because it was like they were rejecting his son. So he would say to me, 'One day we will have an apartment and it will be different.'" Camilla and her husband eventually moved to a different shared housing arrangement where they negotiated the terms and expectations of sharing space up front. As Camila reflected, "When people know they are the ones on the contract, they want to control the other people, for example, 'Don't make noise because tomorrow I have to work'…There is nothing like that with this family."

Leaseholder whims, eviction threats

Life in overcrowded apartments was not only constraining for families, but among subletters, also came with the threat of eviction, often at the whim of a leaseholder. Originally from El Salvador, Antonia lived in the United States with her two children and partner. Renting the living room in a shared apartment, one day the family was evicted, kicked out with no notice:

> She [leaseholder] wanted me to be her maid, clean everything, everything. So, one time I wanted to eat an apple and one of the young men living with her said 'get an apple.' I was like 'I am craving one.'…When she came and saw that I was eating it, she questioned why I grabbed food when we did not pay her for food. I said, 'But my husband is working with your husband and he is going to give you the money for the food during the weekend.'…She said, 'No, you have to look for where to live.' [That night] she had thrown out our mattress in the dumpster…The young man said, 'She said you will no longer live here.' We left at night, kicked out.

During interviews, participants shared stories that were difficult and unsettling, reflecting the harmful impacts of racialized and gendered illegality that fomented toxic power relations. Yet, some participants also shared stories of cooperation, resource sharing, and coresidents helping with childcare and rent assistance when needed—stories of resistance and agentic acts that ran counter to exploitation and marginalization. Among the majority, however, living with strangers was stressful and, particularly among subletters, exacerbated family worries and precarity as leaseholders made the house rules and used the threat of eviction as a cudgel to control them. Because undocumented women with young children were often "trapped" in these apartments, it often fell upon them to manage relationships, navigate shared spaces, keep the peace, control, monitor, and protect their children from potential harms, and avoid eviction.

Doing family, enduring on the margins

As mothers navigated illegality and unequal power relations in the labor and housing markets, they also had to negotiate doing family within an oppressive social structure that positioned

them as primary caregivers of their children and dependent on men's wages. When mothers and their male partners were in solidarity, functioning well and making shared parental sacrifices, many seemed to be achieving their family goals. However, some mothers and their dreams were "ruined," as Gabriela shared, when their partners were detained and deported or their relationships fell apart. Single mothers in the context of racialized and gendered illegality, faced particularly daunting challenges. Yet, some saw their liberation as tied to their singlehood.

Solidarity and shared parental sacrifice

Among participants who lived in Chirilagua with their partners ($n = 16$), most worked in the labor market alongside their mates, forming dual-earner families. The majority of men worked in construction or in the restaurant industry, generating significantly more wages than what mothers could earn in the gendered, unequal labor market. For some families, men's wages were sufficient to emulate a traditional nuclear family, where mothers stayed home and primarily cared for children. For example, Rosita relied solely on her husband's wages (a TPS holder) while rearing her three children (ages 16, 8, and 5) in a two-bedroom apartment. Her family did not sublet space in their $1600 per month unit. Rosita was both cognizant of her family's privileges and aware of others' precarity. When asked what it meant to be a good parent, she said:

> It means to give time to your children. So I don't work in order to watch over them. Because when I had first arrived here, I saw…a lady [who] had two jobs from six in the morning until ten at night and she would leave a 5-year-old child alone. So I said, not with my children.

During the interview, Rosita discussed how her husband worked long hours as a roofer and how she managed the home front. When asked if she felt like her partnership was egalitarian, she affirmed, stating that she and her husband shared many childcare duties and were making sacrifices in solidarity for their children. Indeed, she would like to swap roles so her husband could stay home. Yet, as an undocumented mother with limited English, she understood that her opportunities to participate in the labor market and earn a family wage were gendered and constrained by illegality. She was dependent on her husband's positionality (male, TPS holder) and his wages to make her dreams a reality in the United States. This arrangement worked because she and her husband had what she considered a healthy, functional relationship and they were in solidarity, making the shared sacrifices needed to make it in the United States (see Abrego, 2014).

Other participants, like Natalia, a 36-year-old undocumented mother of two (aged 9 and 4) from El Salvador, shared how the decision to work or not work in the labor market was negotiated with her partner. As Natalia described, when she first arrived in the United States after a harrowing immigration journey and reunited with her partner, she began working at a restaurant. But once she became pregnant, her partner did not want her to work anymore, valorizing the traditional nuclear model as best. Natalia added, "My husband has never liked to have someone else take care of our daughters." Yet Natalia eventually returned to paid labor out of economic necessity and to overcome her deeply-felt loneliness. As she shared,

> So I said to my husband, 'I can't be here'…in the house all day…I have to be able to do something. So I wouldn't feel lonely, I obtained a part-time [job]…And maybe that is why I felt good because I was making my own money and I could send my parents some.

Natalia was strategic and planful, coordinating her schedule with her husband so she could earn an income and send remittances home by working two part-time jobs (as a babysitter and cleaning bathrooms) while splitting childcare shifts with her husband. By carefully coordinating schedules, Natalia and her partner fulfilled their parental goals without using paid childcare. However, they carried out this juggle under threat of deportation. As Natalia shared,

> And I worry…because until now I don't know if I have a deportation notice or if they are looking for me.…When you hear immigration is in the area, my cousin might call me and say, 'Don't go out, immigration is around there.' And it is bad because you are afraid.

About her partner, she said, "He is in danger because he does not have a license and he is always driving. He has gone to lawyers…[and] does not have a case…he can't recover his work permit." Natalia's story, as well as Rosita's, illustrate how some couples work in solidarity and through shared parental sacrifice to do family while navigating intersecting structural oppressions. Yet, Natalia's story also foreshadows the vulnerabilities of these families to state-sanctioned detainment and deportation, which can be devastating for mothers and children left behind. As findings suggest, these partnerships built upon unequal and exploitative structures can entrap mothers when relationships are abusive or fall apart. Some mothers were stuck, knowing they could not make it on their own yet longing for their liberation, and others faced daunting challenges as single mothers in the context of racialized and gendered illegality.

Trapped by racialized and gendered illegality

During interviews, several mothers, like Antonia, Gabriela, and Paula, shared stories of feeling trapped by the intersecting oppressions created by structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality that significantly constrained their lives and denied them their liberation. For Antonia, state-sanctioned deportation forced her into single motherhood—and created what Berger Cardoso et al. (2014) call "involuntary transnational families" (p. 197). The deportation of Antonia's husband, along with exclusionary family policies like PRWORA that deny undocumented mothers access to temporary financial aid, also left her destitute. She shared:

> This year my husband was deported. He was imprisoned for seven months. My children one day did not have anything to eat because I was not working. My husband, he worked for us…They caught him driving without a license. The police detained him. But they later sent him to immigration. Immigration asked for a lot of money to let him go. We did not have money. I was alone with my children for a year…We sold everything. I slept on the floor with my children…One day we did not have anything to eat.

Antonia's story, like so many, exemplified how interlocking oppressive forces operate at the structural level—through laws and policies (e.g., PRWORA)—to create punishing conditions that impoverish immigrant women and children, render them food and housing insecure, and remind them that they are not welcome in the United States nor valued as human beings (Abrego, 2014).

Gabriela, a mother of three girls, aged 11, 8, and 5 years, who grew up in Guatemala and had been living in the United States for 11 years at the time of the interview, also experienced her partners' detainment, but she was contemplating a divorce. As Gabriela shared, her husband was an alcoholic and he had been recently detained (again) for "driving with a broken light and without a license." She noted that her husband had been driving in a county in

Virginia "that is more racist" and that did not "like the undocumented." She said, "And they got him. I think he had drank about four, five beers, but that is considered drunk. He was detained…[and] if he doesn't get out, oh, I will get a divorce." As Gabriela's story unfolded, she reflected on feeling abandoned by her husband and how she does not "want to live like this anymore." She said:

> Right now things are ruined for me because he knew we depended on him. For rent, for everything. And he gets into that [drinking]…The situation is very difficult…And now he is paying the consequences, [and] above all my daughters suffer for his absence.

But Gabriela also reflected on the police and the immigration system, when she shared:

> But these things, these immigration things are a hell. That is why I tried to lead a good life, not getting myself into problems. Not even with the police since they have me traumatized. But they have me traumatized; him, the police, and immigration…They have me crazy. That is why when you are an immigrant here, you should walk as lightly as you can. Living in limbo like they say…not being noticeable that you are living here.

Other participants, like Paula, also discussed how things can go wrong when couple solidarity is shattered by betrayal or intimate partner violence. At the time of the interview, Paula was living in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment that she shared with 13 people. Paula, her husband and her three children (aged 14, 3, and 4 months) shared one bedroom, paying $650 per month in rent. The other bedroom housed a couple who shared the space with their son and his girlfriend. The living room was rented by four men who laid blankets on the floor as beds. As Paula discussed what a typical day was like and how she navigated the living spaces shared by so many, she began to cry. She shared that after her 4-month-old son was born, she found out that her husband was having an affair with their babysitter. The affair was especially painful because Paula thought of this woman as a friend and losing the trust and solidarity she had with her husband and friend made her feel even more alone in the United States. She did not share this painful circumstance with her mother who was living in El Salvador because she did not want to worry her. Instead, she repressed the pain and accepted the violation of trust for the sake of her children, adding, "We are not going to do harm to any of our children." She said she would continue living with her husband in their one-room home because she was trapped—she could not make it on her own just yet. She said, "I think that once I work and my children are older…I am going to separate from him…because it is difficult on your own in this country."

In search of liberation

The majority of mothers in this study experienced significant traumas (e.g., witnessing, enduring violence crossing the border) and abusive power relations (e.g., in the workplace, in overcrowded housing). Some, like Paula and Gabriela, also experienced relational challenges (e.g., conflict, substance abuse, infidelity). Women who wanted to exit partnerships that were dysfunctional or abusive, believing their liberation was tied to their singlehood, expressed significant doubts about making it on their own given the exploitation and marginalization in the labor and housing markets. The women who were single parenting due the deportations of their partners or the dissolution of their relationships confirmed how difficult it was to navigate the harshness of life under the weight of racialized and gendered illegality.

For example, Ana had been living in the United States for 14 years at the time of the interview. She was solo parenting her two daughters (aged 14 and 5) and was pregnant, but not in a stable relationship. Tragically, she had been grieving the recent and horrific death of her son, who was 16 when he drowned crossing the Rio Grande en route to reunifying with Ana after 14 years of separation. In her grief, Ana shared: "Well, there are days, like I tell you, I have to go on…I have to keep going because I also have them [her daughters]." Her circumstances were strained further due to a diagnosis of gestational diabetes that forced her to quit her cleaning job.

Ana and her two daughters lived in a one-bedroom apartment that they shared with two unrelated single men; her share of the rent was $775 per month. The men occupied the bedroom and Ana's family occupied the living room, which was sparsely furnished with one full-size bed, a dresser, and a desk. Her oldest daughter did not have a bed, as Ana shared: "For now, [she] is getting used to sleeping on the floor. Like I tell you, I stopped working and I don't have money to buy her a bed." Ana was making ends meet by relying on the sporadic financial support that she received from her daughters' fathers, with whom she had complex histories. Despite the myriad hardships and traumas, Ana framed her life as better than back home. She shared, "Because we lived a different life than how I live now. And I do not want my children to suffer like I did. Well, I try to give them what I can, what is in my hands." She went on, "I tell them, 'When there is food, you have to eat…and when there is none, then you have to endure'."

While single mothers experienced the most precarious circumstances by far, revealing the devastating force of structural racism and heteropatriarchy when interlinked with illegality, some also expressed how their singleness was important to their identities as liberated women. For example, Idalia, a Guatemalan 45-year-old single mother of two teenage boys, shared: "I want to be alone. I feel that, by myself, I feel a lot better. A little bit without money, but I feel a lot better." Another mother, Fernanda, came to the United States from Honduras to escape a violent marriage and grieve the loss of her infant child. She eventually repartnered and had another child, but her partner was later deported, rendering her a single mother. Years later, she met another man and, together, they had a child, her third. This relationship ended amicably and Fernanda shared that she and her ex are mutually supportive of each other. She reflected:

> It's just that I am a bit complicated. I do not like for someone to tell me what to do. I do not like to be pressured. In other words, I like to be free. In order to be free, I have to be alone. When I am with someone, I feel like he has me imprisoned.

DISCUSSION

Critical perspectives and alternative research approaches like CBPAR are needed in family science to advance understanding of how structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality—central pillars of White supremacy—are conditioning and constraining the lives of Central American immigrant mothers and other minoritized and marginalized families. Resistant knowledge projects like *Amigas de la Comunidad*, coproduced by immigrant women and university researchers, can serve as a catalyst for critically analyzing intersecting oppressive forces operating within systems and taking action to change them (Collins, 2019).

In this study, as mothers' narratives made plain, the oppressive forces of racialized and gendered illegality bearing down on them made meeting their individual and familial basic needs exceedingly challenging. Undocumented mothers were relegated to poorly paid, unbenefited jobs, and exposed to harassment, predation, and other abusive working conditions. But mothers were not alone in their exposures to abuse. Some mothers who were balancing earning and caring demands also shared stories about their children's experiences with abuse and neglect at the hands of informal neighbor caregivers. The lack of childcare options available to mothers in this study reflected a structural reality that endangered children. Enriquez (2015) referred to

such phenomena as multigenerational punishment, recognizing that anti-immigrant and gendered laws, policies, and practices produced punishing family outcomes across generations. In a labor market hostile to undocumented women, mothers also shared how some employers would use knowledge of mothers' legal status against them, threatening to call ICE, which could lead to detainment, deportation, and family separation. Mothers, who were all positioned as the primary caregivers of their children, felt they had no choice but to bear these oppressive and exploitative labor conditions for their children's sake, making personal sacrifices to protect their families from deportation while working to better their children's lives.

Exploitation and marginalization in the labor market coupled with the lack of affordable housing in the region forced immigrant mothers and their families into overcrowded housing where they lived with strangers. Indeed, nearly all mothers in this study lived in doubled or tripled up overcrowded apartments where, on average, their entire family occupied just one bedroom in an apartment unit. This living configuration led mothers to be planful and ingenious as they worked to negotiate kitchen and bathroom access and repurposed limited spaces for family use, yet it was also stressful. Children, especially preschoolers, were often denied access to space to play or explore, and mothers lamented this lack of freedom. If a family was a subletter, it often fell to mothers to navigate power dynamics, eviction threats, and keep the peace with leaseholders, while constraining children's movements and keeping them safe.

Under the weight of racialized and gendered illegality, it is perhaps unsurprising that undocumented Central American immigrant mothers' familial adaptations to life in the United States were both conditioned and constrained. Yet, many persisted, resisted intersecting oppressions, and persevered, often in partnership with their spouse or compañero. As findings suggested, when couples were in solidarity, working together cohesively and strategically to meet their family needs and goals, they could make it in the United States. However, as is often the case under heteropatriarchy (Folbre, 2021), mothers were positioned as the orchestrators of this relational strategy, carefully planning and interweaving work and meal schedules, kitchen and bathroom access in their overcrowded units, and childcare needs. In the context of illegality, this planning was often tenuous, made vulnerable by state-sanctioned threats of detention and deportation. Indeed, mothers who were economically marginalized and dependent upon men's wages for their survival faced ruin when their partners were detained and/or deported. Without access to federal emergency aid (e.g., TANF, food stamps), deportations created significant precarity for mothers.

In this study, findings also showed how structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality interlocked to structurally trap women—and especially those with young children—in relationships that were dysfunctional, unfulfilling, abusive, or like Paula's, unmoored by infidelity and betrayal. While relational dissolution and divorce are often preceded by conflict, substance abuse, and/or infidelity in the general population (e.g., Scott et al., 2013), undocumented mothers experiencing these relational challenges often had few viable options for exiting their unions and making it as single mothers in such harsh labor and housing markets. Those women who were rearing their children as single mothers did so in a context that was exploitative, punishing, and marginalizing. Single mothers were focused on stringing together a series of low-paying jobs, securing childcare that was safe and aligned with their nonstandard work hours, and securing housing that did not require them to walk on eggshells for fear of eviction and/or family separation. While single mothering was difficult, some mothers saw their liberation—and their resistance to heteropatriarchy—as interlinked with their singlehood. Singlehood as a liberating force for women merits greater study in family science.

Dynamics of abusive power relations

Another significant finding in this study that demands more research attention related to the complex, intersectional, hierarchical power dynamics that manifested at multiple levels—at

work, at home, and in the community. As Del Real (2019) found, and this study confirmed, hierarchies of legality and mixed statuses can create vulnerabilities and toxic ties in immigrant family relationships. However, some undocumented mothers in this study also experienced abuses of power and predation at work, where they lived, and in the neighborhood. Mothers described how, in the labor market, they experienced oppressive hierarchies where those with more power, often Latinx immigrants legally authorized to be in the U.S., were discriminatory, threatening, or abusive to those with liminal or undocumented statuses. Some mothers experienced the same predatory power hierarchies in overcrowded housing, where leaseholders (often immigrants) used eviction as a cudgel to control subletters. Mothers in need of childcare so they could eke out a living also expressed alarm when they found Latina neighbors who they were paying to take care of their children subsequently neglecting and abusing them.

Mothers expressed a deep sense of betrayal over the abuses of power emanating from within their own immigrant community. In trying to understand the power relations at play, we turned to Young's (1990) political theorizing about power and justice. In her writings, Young (1990) rejected simplistic views of power as operating solely between one person who holds institutionalized power over another. Rather, she asserted that institutionalized power was mediated by many "third agents" who "support and execute the will of the powerful" (Young, 1990, p. 31). CAB members speculated that perhaps some members of the immigrant community seeking to secure and advance their own standing in U.S. society or simply survive their own circumstances were willing to dehumanize and subjugate other, more vulnerable immigrants, acting like "third agents" in an oppressive, anti-immigrant regime. Clearly, more research is needed to understand the motivations of those abusive third agents. Likewise, more research is needed to understand the complex within-group power relations fomented by structural racism, heteropatriarchy, and illegality that eroded trust, solidarity and placed undocumented immigrant families in harm's way. Finally, more research is needed to understand the resistance work of community groups (like *Amigas de la Comunidad*) and nonprofit organizations who are organizing, building solidarity networks, and advocating for structural change and justice.

Study limitations

Interpretations of study findings should be weighed against study limitations. All data generated in this study were cross-sectional, based on a small sample, and should be interpreted as descriptive in nature. Moreover, the sample was regional, which further limits generalizability and transferability of findings to other regions in the United States. Indeed, immigrant enclaves within the Northern Virginia region are quite diverse, necessitating community-based and culture-specific inquiry (Woolf et al., 2017). Within the Central American immigrant community, there is great heterogeneity. For example, our study participants were diverse in terms of their countries of origin and time living in the United States. Although we did not purposefully examine within-group differences or time in the United States, such factors are important to consider in future studies to more deeply understand the nuanced experiences of immigrant family life in the United States.

CONCLUSION

Despite limitations, this study was strengthened by its critical perspective and use of a CBPAR approach, where university researchers partnered with undocumented Central American and other Latina immigrant mothers as coresearchers to build a resistant knowledge project (Collins, 2019). Working together and in concert with staff from immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations, we took action steps in the Chirilagua neighborhood and beyond its borders to

try to redress some of the harms created by racialized and gendered illegality. These community-driven actions often functioned as organic interventions (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012). For example, CAB members and university researchers coordinated clothing drives, cosponsored community-based school registration drives, supported health outreach efforts, and co-organized Know Your Rights legal clinics. We also worked as a collective to disseminate research findings within the community and at the state and national levels. More researchers should endeavor to build resistant knowledge projects using CBPAR or alternative research approaches to both study the mechanisms of structural oppression operating to reproduce inequalities *and* take community-directed actions to advance structural change and people's liberation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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