Creating Safe Spaces: Strategies and unintentional consequences of Latina street vendors in Los Angeles

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Abstract:

Based on 66 interviews with child street vendors (ages 10-18) and their parents and two-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork, this article demonstrates that the work that girls and boys do as street vendors both perpetuates and challenges gendered expectations among Latino families in Los Angeles. While both sons and daughters of Mexican and Central American immigrants engage in the family business, it is more common for girls to help their parents than their brothers. This article shows that girls take on greater work responsibilities in the street vending business. The girls in this study are performing a type of work that has been gendered as feminine (food preparation) and they are doing this gendered work on the street, a space that has been gendered as masculine and inappropriate for *señoritas* (virginal women). Paradoxically, while the street is more appropriate for males, in this context, male vendors of all ages report more instances of violence from gang members and their peers. The freedom that their male privilege affords them, also leaves them unprotected from the family and more vulnerable to street violence while peddling the streets of L.A.

Palabras claves: *Economía informal, vendedores ambulantes, criminalización de los jóvenes, género y trabajo.*

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Resumen:

Basada en 66 entrevistas con niños (entre 10-18 años de edad) que se dedican a la venta ambulante con sus padres y en dos años y medio de investigación etnográfica, este articulo demuestra que el trabajo que las niñas y los niños hacen en la calle como vendedores ambulantes promueve y reta las expectativas de genero entre las familias Latinas en Los Ángeles. Mientras que tanto las niñas como los niños se incorporan en el negocio familiar, es más común que las niñas les ayuden a sus papas que sus hermanos. Este artículo demuestra que las niñas tienen más responsabilidades en el negocio de la venta ambulante familiar. Las niñas en este estudio hacen un tipo de trabajo que ha sido afeminado (la preparación de comida) y están haciendo este trabajo en la calle, un espacio que ha sido apropiado por el género masculino e inapropiado para señoritas (mujeres virginales). Paradójicamente, mientras que la calle es más apropiada para hombres, en este contexto, los vendedores varones de cualquier edad reportan más incidentes de violencia por medio de pandilleros y otros hombres. La libertad que les ofrece su privilegio masculino, también los deja desprotegidos del vínculo familiar y vulnerables a violencia mientes venden en las calles de L.A.

Keywords: *Informal economy, street vending, criminalization of youth, gender and work.*

Introduction

The street is viewed as a dangerous space for youth and a disreputable place for women and girls (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009). However, in order to make ends meet, many Latina/o street vendors and their children walk the streets of Los Angeles daily trying to sell *raspados, tamales, tejuino*, or cut-up fruit in order to help with the household survival (Estrada, 2013; 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Estrada and Ramirez, 2011). The Latino families in this study labor in a very public setting—the street—in Los Angeles, California. While doing their work, they are exposed to immigrant xenophobia and dangerous gang members who prey on vulnerable vendors. During 2008-2011, when I conducted this study, street vendors also experienced an extra layer of harassment from local authorities that enforced anti-street vending laws[2]. Working as a family unit helps buffer against these dangers. This article shows that girls work alongside their immigrant parents while boys are often left at home alone or free to roam the street with friends. Those that work in the family business, often sell from their own stand away from the rest of the family.

This article shows that the work that girls and boys do as street vendors both perpetuates and challenges gendered expectations among Latino families. On the one hand, girls are performing a type of work that has been gendered as feminine (preparation of food); on the other, they are doing this gendered work on the street, a space that has been gendered as masculine and inappropriate for *señoritas* (virginal women). While the street is more appropriate for males, in this context, the boys have reported more instances of violence from gang member and

[2] On February 2, 2017 Los Angeles City Council passed two motions. The first one instructs City Attorney to decriminalize street vending and the other instructs the City Attorney to draft a street vending ordinance that will establish a legal permit system. It is expected to have a legal permit system in place by 2018.

their own peers. This is in part because they are often unaccompanied by their parents and because of the criminalization of young Latino boys that places them at a social disadvantage. Hence, an analysis of gender in this type of ethnic business allows us to see how gendered beliefs are not only enforced by societal norms but also internalized, reinforced, challenged, and adjusted by working class Latino family members to meet the needs of the family business while still providing protection for their daughters and sons.

Based on two-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork and 66 interviews with adolescent street vendors and their parents, this article explores the different roles that boys and girls play in their parents' street vending family business by addressing the following questions: (1) How does gender shape the youth's street vending experience in Los Angeles? (2) To what extent does the street vending work performed by the children of Mexican and Central American street vendors challenge or continue familial gendered expectations?

The lives of these young Latino street vendors are complex as they navigate multiple spheres as informal street vending workers, as the sons and daughters of undocumented street vendors, and as racialized youth. Hence, this study is informed and builds on various interdisciplinary bodies of literature including: the informal economy and more specifically street vending; Latino families, and the criminalization of youth.

Literature review. Situating children in Los Angeles street vending markets

Los Angeles has a long tradition of street vending, but it was not until 1970 and 1980 that this activity became associated with undocumented Latinos (Zukin, 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Muñoz, 2008; 2016; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001; Kettles, 2007; Dyrness, 2001).

When the study took place it was illegal to street vend in Los Angeles (Cross and Morales, 2007)[3]. Many new immigrants from México and Central America are relegated to working in the informal sector of the economy because they are undocumented, educationally disadvantaged, do not speak English and lack the skills needed to find employment in the formal sector (Cross and Morales, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Zlolniski, 2006; Kettles, 2007). These barriers have pushed many immigrants to informal sector work. This study builds on this knowledge by focusing on the children of immigrants, those who do not meet the characteristics of the street vendors we have learned about in the scholarly literature. The street vendors in this study speak English, the majority were born in the U.S., they are attending school full time and work side by side as street vendors with their immigrant parents. While it is difficult to provide an estimate for the number of street vendors in Los Angles due to the informal nature of the work, a report in 2015 by the Economic Roundtable found that there are over 50,000 street vendors in the Los Angeles area (Yen Liu *et al*., 2015).

It is predominately women who do street vending and this is explained by the flexible nature of the job, as it allows women to take care of their children while they work (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001; Dyrness, 2001; Ari-

[3] It was not always illegal to street vend in Los Angeles. The criminalization of street vending took place in the turn of the 20th century, as the city became more Anglicized (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). In 1910, the first city ordinance (19,867) passed making it illegal for Chinese street vendors to sell fruits and vegetables (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009). Today, street vending continues to be an illegal activity enforced by the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). (Kettles, 2004; Muñoz, 2008; Dyrness, 2001). Street vending is considered a misdemeanor (Kettles, 2004). However, when the LAHD and the LAPD join forces and conduct sweeps together, the punishment is usually more serious and can result in six months in jail and confiscation of merchandise and wares in addition to a $1,000 fine (Kettles, 2004). Citations are usually given to street vendors for other reasons not directly connected to the sales of food (e.g. blocking the sidewalk or the street).

zpe, 1995). Street vending mothers in Los Angeles bring their children to work with them as a daycare strategy (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001; Muñoz, 2008). Childcare is often an extra layer of constraint relegated to working mothers (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2005; Romero, 2011). As a result, many say that the lack of adequate child care pushes them to bring their children to their street vending sites. However, as my research shows, many children are also working with their parents to help make ends meet and are not there just passive agents.

Most research on children and street vending work is situated in developing countries and in these places, the father is the main decision maker in the household (Jacquemin, 2004; Camacho, 1999; Abebe and Kjorholt, 2010; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1994). Based on a study in Guadalajara, México, Anthropologist Gonzalez de la Rocha (1994) argues that power in the household is centralized in the patriarchal father, and women and children remain disenfranchised despite their labor contributions. Bunster and Chaney (1989: 174), in their study of street vendors in Peru, also found that fathers are the official decision maker where their "*machista* authority is never questioned." Even in studies where women play key roles in street vending markets, men usually assume leadership positions. Such is the case of the shrimp traders or *changueras*, in Mazatlan, Mexico. According to Cruz-Torres (2012), the female shrimp trader's union composed by women who have a reputation for being strong and vocal about their right to organize and defend their equal access to the marketing of shrimp is led by a man. While women recognize the value of having a union, "many women resent having a man lead their union" stated Cruz-Torres (615). The community of Mazatlan explains this type of representation in leadership through a gendered justification that positions men as objective, flexible in time, strong and in control. Cruz-Torres explains:

> *One reason proposed by mazatlecos is that only a man would be able to control the changueras, given their reputations as strong-minded and independent women. The version more widespread in Mazatlan folklore, however, holds that precisely because of the strength and economic independence of the changueras, they are indeed better off with a man as their leader···However, the women shrimp traders' own explanation is that a male president has more flexibility and free time to attend meetings and other events organized by Mazatlan City Hall and the PRI* (615).

According to the author, having a male present in the street is a sign of respect and authority that offers protection to female vendors. The children in this study have a set of resources that trump the male gender privilege and in turn we see the value in having women present in the street. In addition, the children's citizenship, language skills, and popular culture knowledge are important resources for children who street vend in Los Angeles (Estrada, 2013; 2016). While these may be irrelevant resources in countries where children and their parents speak the dominant language, my study shows that in the United States these are valuable resources for the street vending youth and their families. In addition, Latino child street vendors use their own citizenship not as an individual right and privilege, but as a resource that can be used to help the family as a protection mechanism against the police. This is facilitated by the U.S. context in which street vending takes place and the children's distinctive resources that are also context based. The focus on these hidden resources held by actors that have been portrayed as vulnerable workers disadvantaged by gender in developing countries might shed a different perspective in street vending markets. Placing children in the center of analysis helps fill a gap in the street vending literature and it also sheds light on gender dynamics that impact Latino families in the U.S.

Good girls belong at home.

Latino parents in the U.S. go to great lengths to keep their daughters confined at home when not in school or chaperoned by a family member. Parents generally try to protect girls from dangerous streets, neighbors, and especially boys. In New York City, for example, Smith (2006) found that Mexican immigrant parents restricted their daughters' spatial mobility, keeping them home "on lockdown" (like a prison) while boys were allowed to roam the streets.

Many Latino parents believe that protecting their daughters' virginity is important. Sociologist Gloria González-López (2005) conceptualizes virginity as *capital femenino*, a strategic, life-enhancing resource that will allow girls to have a better future and marry better husbands. Some Mexican immigrant parents are changing these views on the necessity of maintaining their daughters' premarital virginity, but many still want their daughters monitored at home. This idea holds true for immigrant parents from other countries with strong Spanish Catholic traditions, including the Philippines. As Espiritu (2001) has noted, Filipina girls in the United States are expected to be family -oriented, chaste, and willing to serve the family. While parents push these girls to strive for education, achievement, and elite college admissions, some of these parents have then forbidden their daughters to go away to college (Wolf, 1994). These parents construct their daughters as morally superior to their white Anglo counterparts.

The strong emphasis on the family burdens the girls with unpaid reproductive work and domestic confinement (Espiritu, 2001). Morality is expressed through dedication to family and protection from public streets and sexual danger. Less has been written about the protection mechanisms employed by the family to protect young boys. This is perhaps because men enjoy social privileges that depict them as self-sufficient and as the protectors and not the ones in need of protection. However, recent scholarship has explored how Latino and Black youth are not immune to street violence. This is very important to the

study of young street vendors in Los Angeles, because they perform their work on the street, sometimes during high-crime hours. I turn my attention to this on the next section.

The criminalization of Latino boys

Latino and Black boys in the U.S. are often criminalized as gang members. Sociologist Victor Rios (2011) in his book Punished narrates the experience of both delinquent and non-delinquent Latino youth in California. Rios (2011) states that the non-delinquent boys in his study were also "criminalized in the same systematic way as their delinquent peers" (144). As a result, non-delinquent youth learned to navigate multiple worlds including being good students to avoid getting in trouble in school or with the police and they also learned how to survive on the street among their delinquent peers by learning what sociologist Anderson (1999) calls the "code of the street."

Anderson argues "simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior" (32). As a survival mechanism, it is important to know the code of the street, which are a "set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence" (33). The code is so powerful that even the families that Anderson calls "decent" encourage their children to know the code in order to be capable or negotiating inner-city environment. For example, someone who knows the code of the street knows that maintaining eye contact for too long is a sign of disrespect. Anderson adds that the code of the street is a cultural adaptation and a response to the lack of faith towards the police. This article shows that for Latino street vendors, knowing the code is not the best survival strategies. The young boys in this study often have to decide on alternative strategies of behavior where they appear to be ignorant of street life.

Negative stereotypes that criminalize Latino and Black boys have also infiltrated into the schools. Nancy Lopez

(2003) reveals that the criminalization that takes place at schools is racialized and also gendered. Lopez (ibid) argues that the gender gap in education is most pronounced among Blacks and Latinos, two of the most racially stigmatized groups in the U.S. During her ethnographic fieldwork at an inner-city New York high school, Lopez (ibid) witnessed "much physical and symbolic violence directed towards young men" (74). Teachers and security guards often labeled the male students as "problem" boys. Girls on the other hand, were seen as less problematic and threatening in the classroom and usually received more praises and encouragement to pursue their goals. In this study, we see how these disadvantages are also experienced by young Latino vendors in the streets of Los Angeles while they are vending.

Methodology

I conducted this research at two different street vending sites I call *La Cumbrita*[4] and *El Callejon*, in Boyle Heights, a small neighborhood in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is the second largest metropolitan city in the United States. This city is home to almost 5 million Latinos (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010)[5]. I conducted observations in three different arenas of social life: the work site while children work alongside their parents or on their own, at various social events and in the household. At first, I blended in with the customers and stood along the sidewalk eating food from

[4] *La Cumbrita* and *El Callejon* are pseudonyms given to the sites I studied in order to protect the anonymity of my respondents.

[5] California is a unique social laboratory to study the children of immigrants from Latin America. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, California is the top state in the U.S. with the largest Latino population. There are over 14 million Latinos in California, accounting for 37% of the state's population. Latinos comprise the largest minority group in this state and in the U.S. Nationwide, the children of Latino immigrants and Latino immigrant children, under the age of 18, exceed 30 million (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly, 2008).

paper plates or comfortably sat on folding chairs arranged in front of a small television provided by one of the street vendors. Later, I helped the families by running errands to the store. I also cut fruit and assisted customers while the children took bathroom breaks or socialized with their cousins and friends. I gained the trust of the families I studied and some invited me to their homes and to various social events. Yet, I was never left in charge of money transactions. That was a task restricted for family members.

I also shadowed five families for two months at a time in many social settings. I spent a great deal of time with them in their homes and while they street vended. The time I spent with these five families allowed me to "witness" how the youth and the parents in this study interacted with various social actors and how they dealt and responded to different situations at the workplace and at home. As recommended by sociologist Erving Goffman (1989), I subjected myself to their life circumstances. I spent a great deal of time at their homes, when they worked, and at various social events. When I spent time at their homes, I was a participant observer. I helped prepare food and I also volunteered to help with the children's homework. I felt more comfortable when I was street vending with them. Street vending gave me something to do and it made me feel more useful. I also felt nervous and scared to imagine that a police officer would give us a citation or arrest us for street vending. However, these fears for me were situational and temporarily since I was able to leave my research site at any time while my respondents could not. I also enjoyed of extra layers of protection based on my level of education, my U.S. citizenship and my status as a researcher. My respondents, on the other hand, even those who were U.S. citizens lived in constant stress even after they left the streets because they feared for their undocumented family members (Toomey, *et al*., 2015; Estrada, 2013).

Interviews

I conducted a total of 66 interviews with the youth and their parents. I recruited most of the interview respondents while they worked. I told them about my study while I purchased and ate their food. This practice was very successful. One mother told me she only agreed to participate in this study after I purchased a bag of fruit from her because police officer or health inspectors do not buy food. I was more successful in landing an interview when the initial introduction was followed by the interview the same day. I made sure to always be prepared with my interview guide, consent forms, and my digital recorder every time I went to the field. This meant that some interviews were conducted on the street while they street vended. This initial interview allowed me to establish rapport with the vendors and additional interviews with family members were typically at their homes.

Some families were afraid of me when I first approached them for an interview. They thought I was an undercover police officer or a health inspector. Some street vendors were also leery of me because they believed a sociologist was a social worker and as such I could be looking to report instances of child exploitation. My ability to speak Spanish without an accent helped me explain my research to the parents (all monolingual Spanish speakers) and ease their fears. Trust and rapport were enhanced when they learned about my own experience working with my parents as a child.

I used semi-structured interview guides and I asked questions about their immigration experience if they were born outside the United States or about their parent's immigration experience. This included their work occupation and their family work relations in the sending country. I asked both parents and the youth about the first time they started street vending and how they decided to enter this

occupation. I was interested in knowing what role and responsibilities children played within the family business. I also asked about client relations and included a set of questions on the household. I wanted to know what chores children had and how they balanced family, work and school responsibilities. Lastly, I had a subset of questions pertaining to children's school and educational aspirations.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and lasted approximately one to two hours. All of the interviews with the parents were in Spanish. The interviews with the youth were in both languages. The youth and I frequently switched from Spanish to English during the interviews. I interviewed parents and children separately. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained and all protocols were followed. Once interviews were transcribed, I coded for themes. The extended case method directed engagement with existing scholarship (Burawoy, 1998), and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) offered guidelines for coding and organizing the data.

Sample description

My sample consisted of 66 respondents. I interviewed 38 youth who work with their parents as street vendors. Thirty-five of them were between the ages of 10-18. Three of them are older than 18. Two were 21-years-old, and one had just turned 23 when I interviewed her. The three participants who were 21 and older were included in the sample because they had been street vending with the family since they were 5 years old. The sample was not equally distributed by gender; only eleven of my respondents were boys and twenty-seven of them were girls. My time in the field revealed that more girls were engaged in this type of activity. This was also true for the parents I interviewed. I interviewed fifteen mothers and three fathers. Almost all of the youth had undocumented parents. Only three parents were legal residents.

Street vending girls and boys

This article elucidates that among street vending families, gender inequality is reproduced through acts of love. The section that follows shows how gender shapes the street vending experience for girls and boys in the street vending families I interviewed. Findings reveal that girls in street vending families help more with the family business than boys. Parents seek to protect their children, especially the girls, by keeping them close to them. Parents are less willing to leave their daughters at home unaccompanied while they are more likely to leave their boys unaccompanied. This often means bringing their daughters along to work, a protective mechanism that in turn burdens their daughters with more work responsibilities. Paradoxically, this article highlights that this same strategy coupled with the criminalization of Latino boys in the street puts Latino boy vendors in harms way as they are vulnerable to violence from their peers and local gang members.

Good girls don't stay home, they work with their parents

Leaving girls at home unaccompanied was a concern for many of the vendors I interviewed. Similar to what Espiritu (2001) found, the street vending parents expected their daughters to be family-oriented, chaste, and willing to serve the family. They believed that leaving them unsupervised would invite trouble to their homes. This was the sad reality for fifty-year-old Alondra who street vended alone without the help of her daughters. Alondra sold tamales around her neighborhood early every morning before her daughter went to school and on the weekends. Her daughter refused to help her because they were embarrassed of her mother's chosen occupation (for more on this see Estrada, 2016). Alondra worried for her teenage daughters especially because she had a suspicion that

her oldest daughter snuck her boyfriend inside the house when she was out street vending. Her suspicions were true. Months later after I interviewed her, she told me she was going to be a grandmother. "*Felicidades* [congratulations]," I replied after she shared the news. "*Que felicidades ni que nada. Estoy tan enojada con ella. Yo aquí fregándome para que me paguen así.* [Don't congratulate me. I am very mad at her. I am here working hard and this is how they re-pay me]."

Most of the parents I interviewed brought their daughters to work with them. It was more common for them to leave their sons at home. For example, Edgar a thirteen-years-old boy who sells *tejuino* (a corn based Mexican drink) with his mother is an only child. During my interview he told me that he had a very flexible schedule that did not include household work. When he was not selling *tejuino* he would go to the gym with his friend. Edgar was not only free from household work but he was also able to free himself from street vending work.

This was not always possible for girls. Katia, who was 21-years-old when I interviewed her in her one-bedroom apparent remembered selling fruit with her older brother and mother. Staring at a picture where a younger Katia posed with her mother and brother Carlos before he went to jail, she reminisced of times when Carlos, her cousin Itzel and her street vended with her mother. Katia stated, "[My brother] was more wild. He used to go help [my mother] and then go home. He was not like us. [My cousin and I were] stuck to my mom." Katia did not resent the fact that her brother was able to go home while she had to stay with her mother and sell fruit. Even though she recognized working more hours than her brother, she justified their work arrangements along gender lines and "natural" gender differences between her and her brother.

> *As a girl, you know? [I am] a girl, he is a guy. I guess he had a girlfriend already, you know? He would leave earlier, you know? He would leave with his friends. He would help my mom for a little bit and then he would go*

> *with his friends. I had to stay there cuz I was a girl. I was with my mom. And he is a guy. You know? Guys, they just leave with their friends.* (Katia, age 21, Worked with mother since age five).

Although Carlos was not interviewed for this study, he narrative his sister Katia shared with us followed a similar pattern in our interviews with the boys. Girls were typically brought to the street vending site by their parents or by an older sibling who typically dropped them off at their street-vending destination. Once at their street vending site, they could only go home if they were escorted or after they finished street vending at the end of the day. This was a strategy to protect the girls that in turn made them work more and longer hours. For Katia's mother, keeping her daughter close even though Katia ended up working more in the street gave her peace of mind that other mothers such as Alondra, who ended up with a pregnant daughter, did not have.

This preventive measure worked. Sociologist Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) states that a women's virginity or reputation is a *capital femenino* that not only brings honor to the family, but also helps young ladies find a man that would marry and support them financially. For these families, the good girls were those that worked with their parents even if the work was done away from home in a space that is seen as dangerous and inappropriate for virginal women.

Protecting the girls

As we have seen, girls worked closely with their parents. This work arrangement offered them protection from sexual advancements and other dangers from men. While working on the street, the girls reported neutral experiences with gang members who purchased food and some even engaged in small talk with them. The girls I interviewed were never asked if they were affiliated to any gang. The young men, on the other hand, enjoyed more

freedom. Many had their own stand or were given time off from street vending to roam around the street and hang out with friends. This freedom often came with a heavy price because without their parent's supervision they were more vulnerable to gang and peer harassment.

Even when the girls worked alone, the family went to great lengths to provide protection for their daughters. A common protection strategy was to have the girls stationed in public parks where a familial environment prevailed—for example, at a playground. In another family, the daughter sold cut-up fruit alone at a park, with relatives selling fruit nearby. While these girls sold their food at safe parks or busy street corners on their own, their parents often sold at more dangerous spots and/or sold merchandise that was considered more dangerous than food (pirated DVDs, for example). For example, while Sonia (age 13) sold fruit by herself at a popular park in East Los Angeles, her mother sold fruit and flowers by a freeway entrance, a location perceived as more dangerous for a young girl. Her father sold pirated CDs and DVDs on a popular street in Boyle Heights. Even though Sonia lacked a vending permit, selling fruit inside a park was perceived as safer than being near the freeway or selling products that would merit jail time if police chose to intervene. In addition, Sonia used the family's only "official-looking" metal cart, while her mother used a shopping cart. Similarly, Lolita, a sixteen-year-old who sold corn on the cob, mangos, and churros at a park south of Los Angeles, was dropped off by her father early every Saturday and Sunday. Her father then would sell the same items, but he did so while walking down the street, a practice that made him more visible and vulnerable to police harassment. Lolita, however, sold in a more controlled environment where many Mexican immigrant families went to spend their weekend days.

Who protects the boys?

Almost all of the young Latino boys I interviewed, including their fathers or uncles, experienced physical violence

from peers who teased them for doing "Mexican" work, local gang members who sought to extort them for their earnings, and the police. Thirteen-year-old Edgar, for example, was born and raised in Boyle Heights and attended a private Catholic school in the area. When I met him, he was sitting next to his mother's *tejuino* cart wearing a shirt he had purchased in México City a few days earlier. His mother radiated with happiness because her son had finally returned from México, where she had sent him to recuperate from a beating he received from his peers while street vending. On that day, Edgar was street vending alone while his mother ran errands. The common teasing from his peers turned into a fight that left him unable to go to school for a couple of months. Unlike Edgar, thirteen-year-old Sonia who sells cut up fruit across the street from the *tejuino* stand, has never been a victim of physical aggression from her peers or gang members while street vending even though she often street vends alone.

None of my respondents confirmed affiliation to any gangs, but several of them had been victims of gang aggressions. Sociologist Victor Rios (2011) found that even the non-delinquent youth in his study learned to navigate multiple worlds including being good students to avoid getting in trouble in school or with the police. He adds that non-delinquent boys often avoid associations with neighborhood friends and even relatives who are delinquent in order to stay out of trouble. They also avoid being in the street at specific times of the day, from 3:00pm-6:00p.m when school kids are getting out of classes and have more interactions with other students. According to Rios (2011) this is when violence is at its peak. Most of the youth in this study, however, could not avoid the street during these hours. This was usually the time when my respondent sold food outside schools, at parks and at various street vending sites in East Los Angeles. Some often street vended as late as midnight.

The boys in my sample did know the "code of the street," they knew who the gang members were, how they dressed, and where they "hung out". However, their ex-

perience working on the streets taught them that it was best to act submissive, compliant, and ignorant of the "code". For example, sixteen-year-old Alejandro was still very angry when he told me about the day he got stabbed by "some fools". Alejandro was working with his mother at their pancake stand at 9:00 p.m. when he got "jumped". His mother, Lorena, appeared at the scene minutes after the attack and found him laying on the floor next to their small street vending cart. Alejandro was rushed to the hospital and days later Lorena sent him to México with her oldest son so that he could recuperate. Sending the youth to México is a common practice amongst Latino immigrants in the United States. Sociologist Robert Smith (2006) also noticed that his respondents sent their children to their hometown where they could enjoy their freedom, they can party and relax from the confines of living in a busy city where children often lived in lock down. In my study, I found that children were sent to México in order to recuperate from serious beatings they had received while street vending, such as the cases of Alejandro and thirteen-year-old Edgar, mentioned above, who was also beaten while selling *tejuino* with his mother.

This was not the first time Alejandro was assaulted on the street. One day I met Lorena and Alejandro at Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. I invited them to eat Lorena's favorite Chinese food in gratitude for all of the help I received during my study. At the time, I was without a car and I took the metro from Long Beach to East Los Angeles. Grand Central Market was in the middle of my destination. I still needed to take two more metro rides and a bus to get to one of my interviews in Boyle Heights later that afternoon. After breakfast, Lorena offered to take me to my next interview in her car. The door on the passenger's side was broken. Therefore, I sat in the back seat with Alejandro. On our drive to East Los Angeles from down town L.A. we made several stops related to Lorena's street vending business. At one place, she dropped off greeting cards, then she exchanged party balloons with another client, and finally she collected mo-

ney from another vendor. During this time, Alejandro and I talked about his school, his upcoming birthday. He also talked about the many times he has been bothered on the street while street vending. This seem to be an important topic of conversation among the boys I interviewed for this study. Alejandro complemented my new i-phone and told me he had a new i-pod, but could not use it outside the house because "them fools" would "jack it" like they did before. Alejandro was referring to the gang members in his neighborhood. Instead, he used an old nano he bought at the swap meet for 25 dollars. "If they want to take it, I just give it to them" he told me. "I don't put a fight anymore" he continued, but this time, with in a lower tone of voice looking down at his old nano while shuffling through his songs.

Time after time, I heard parents advise their children to not put up a fight if gang members or the police if they ordered them to give up the merchandize or money. This was difficult advice for the young boys to follow. They could not understand how they could be victims of both gang members and the police and why the police could not go after the real problem, the gangs, and not people like them and their parents who were trying to make an honest living.

For example, Eighteen-year-old Joaquin was completing his second semester at a California State University when I interviewed him. He is studying Criminal Justice and Sociology. For the last three years, he has been street vending with his parents on the weekends. Joaquin has his own juice stand and on a good day he makes about 200 dollars. This is money that he uses to help his parents with the bills and also to pay for his 2009 Honda Civic car payment and insurance. He also has a part time job at large department store where he gets additional money to fund his education. Joaquin said that clients are often surprised to learn that he is in college and wants to become a police officer. While talking about his school is a source of pride with some of his clients, he cannot reveal this information with other people he encounters on the street such as the

gang members in his neighborhood. He sees it as pointless to explain to gang members about his school. The best strategy for him is to "act dumb". When I asked him to elaborate, he told me about a time he and his mother went street vending at night.

In addition to selling juices in the morning, Joaquin and his mother also sell small and inexpensive plastic toys that light up. The way they do this is by driving around the neighborhood to see any indicators of someone having a birthday party later that night. They pay attention to the ubiquitous jumpers or party decorations such as balloons or streamers. As he drives up and down the streets of East Los Angeles, his mother writes down several addresses on a piece of paper. After dinner, they load a small cart with toys and head to the addresses they jotted down that morning. One day, while street vending with his mother close to midnight, a gang member called him over and questioned his gang affiliation. Joaquin said:

> *He [the gang member] asked me where I was from because I was wearing a hat. I told him 'just because I'm wearing a hat doesn't mean that I am in a gang.' It was then, when he (the gang member) started telling me 'well you know this is Maravilla.' I told him that I didn't know.*

During this encounter with the gang member, Joaquin pretended not to know that they were in Maravilla territory. Knowing the "code of the street" does not always mean that you play along or keep it real. In Joaquin's case, it was best to appear oblivious of the code in order to not be linked to any gang.

Similarly to Joaquin, eighteen-year-old Pedro also said that gang members have extorted him. *Muchas veces me han seguido y me dicen que tengo que darles dinero.* [Many times they have followed me and they tell me I have to give them money]. This was a pattern among my male respondents. Eric also experience extortion from local gang members. When I interviewed eighteen-year-old Eric at a local coffee house in Boyle Heights, he re-

called the first time a gang members stopped him and took all of his money on his way home after a long day of street vending. Eric recalled having about 200 dollars in his pocket. He had been working all day on Saturday and felt good about the sales for that day. On that sunny Saturday morning and afternoon he sold out the barrel of handmade ice cream he made that morning. Eric was furious when that happened, but knew there was nothing he could do. He told me that after that incident, he only keeps a few dollars inside his jean pocket and hides the rest of the money (about $150 to $200 each day) under the barrel of ice cream. When asked, he pretends to work for someone else and claims that his boss picks up the money before he goes home. Here again, pretending to act innocent, submissive, and to play it dumb helps them survive in the streets they work.

Summary

As Mexican and Central American immigrants make their way in subordinated and saturated Los Angeles labor markets, many of them find that their best economic options are to utilize the labor of all possible family members, including their children (Dyrness, 2001). In this article, I find that gender shapes the work experience of adolescent street vendors in Los Angeles. While both sons and daughters engage in the family business, it is more common for girls to help their parents than their brothers. I found that girls take on greater work responsibilities in the street vending business. Their labor contributions are vital for the family's economic mobility and they are also valued by their parents. In turn, these young ladies experience direct benefits from their street vending work, including spatial mobility where they are able to spend time outside the house, even if their time spent in the public sphere is monitored by their parents. They also gain money from their work and spending power that enables them to buy clothes and even pay for their school supplies. Equally as

important, they gain decision making power within the household where their decision about street vending are respected and valued by the parents (for more on this please read Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011).

These street vending families have produced an adaptive culture that involves using femininity (in combination with boys using naiveté) as protections against street violence. This is in part, due to a combined influence of culture-of-origin gender beliefs and their current environmental demands (Garcia-Coll *et al*., 1996). The families in this study took more precaution measures to protect their daughters while their sons were given more freedom. These strategies for protecting the girls were very effective. However, this article highlights the dangers that young male vendors also experience on the street. Many of the boys in my study had been victims of gang violence. The benefits of freedom grated to them by their male privilege came to a great expense for the boys. This is a difficult situation for boys to assimilate because they have to play down their masculinity and act submissive in the presence of gang aggression.

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