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Women and the L.A. Immigrant Rights Movement: A Review of Ruth Milkman' s Recent Senior Feminist Faculty Seminar

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WOMEN

and the L.A. Immigrant Rights Movement

DO GENDER CONCERNS COMPETE WITH GROUP RIGHTS?

WHILE researching labor dynamics in the immigrant rights movement, Professor Ruth Milkman of the Department of Sociology at UCLA, noticed an intriguing paradox. Though Latina women are visible movers and shakers in leading the struggle for immigrant rights in Los Angeles, they are not articulating gender concerns in the discourse of their protest. In an effort to understand why, Milkman, in collaboration with Veronica Terriquez, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at USC, is examining how gender plays a role in the process. On November 4, 2009, UCLA students, faculty, and visiting scholars had the opportunity to learn more about Milkman's

scholarship at the Senior Faculty Feminist Seminar, hosted by the Center for the Study of Women.

In the early phases of the research, the two are already identifying distinct trends. To gauge Latina perspectives on gender dynamics within the immigrant community, Milkman and Terriquez have already interviewed fourteen prominent women in the movement. Though the circumstances of their experience vary with each individual, the research indicates that, in comparison with men, women attest to a marked improvement in gender status when they come to the United States. Challenging the machismo social

framework that many women say dictated life in their home countries, participation in the workforce empowers Latinas and substantiates their claims to equality. Despite the fact that many of the positions available to immigrant women are in the domestic sphere, employment enables the women to be recognized as financial contributors to their families. Rather than reinforcing traditional gender roles by focusing on the nature of their work, immigrant men are increasingly acknowledging their wives, mothers, and sisters as equals. Connected to this recognition, however, is a subsequent loss in gender status among male immigrants, who

tend to have greater difficulty and less interest in integrating into their new communities.

While men remain nostalgic for their homeland, women generally prefer conditions in Los Angeles, difficulties and all. As a result, many immigrant communities have formed hometown associations, made up of families from the same region of their native country. Though these neighborhood councils have become significant community builders among immigrants, they are often dominated by men. Although frustrated by the disconnect between their elevated status within the family and the perpetuation of patriarchy within the community, Latinas answered the call to organize for immigrant rights instead.

Examining the 2006 March for Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles as a case study, Milkman and Terriquez asked women who led the demonstration, the largest-ever protest of its kind, about how they framed their demands for human rights. When asked why women's issues were not an explicit part of the agenda, one leader responded that for many immigrants, the denial of basic human rights is a "life-or-death" situation; advocating for the universal needs of the community necessitates the subordination of gender-specific demands. Interestingly, the researchers also explained

that many women describe their leadership in the movement as an extension of motherhood, because they are focused on improving the welfare of their children. Ultimately, they also argue that Latina activists further the feminist mandate simply by participating in the movement as leaders. Although objections to the widespread sexual harassment of immigrant women by their employers has not, for example, entered the common discourse of the movement, the fact that Latinas are visible as organizers encourages gender equality.

Still, the absence of gender concerns in protest rhetoric is symbolic, said Professor Maylei Blackwell, Department of Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, who was the seminar's designated respondent. A gender consultant for the National Day Labor Organizing Network, Blackwell suggested that Latinas face a dual struggle between the "public agenda" of the immigrant rights movement and the "internalities of power" within their communities. Dissatisfied with the gender hierarchy of such community organizations as hometown associations, women are pressured to keep their protests quiet in order to promote group solidarity; they are told that voicing gender concerns would compromise a united front. Another critical perspective shared by

Blackwell was for the need to challenge the "culturally laden discourse" that women's status improves upon immigrating to the United States. Instead, she suggested, it becomes more complicated, as Latinas take on the roles of breadwinner and (in this case) activist, *in addition* to their roles as mothers and wives.

Although their research is still in progress, Milkman and Terriquez have already initiated an important dialogue: the challenge of reconciling *group* rights with *gender* rights. While some activists object to the inclusion of gender-specific demands in the protest for immigrant rights under the premise that it fractures the movement's unity, they ought to be reminded that feminist concerns are never exclusive to women. On the contrary, the championing of women's rights paves the way for the realization of universal human rights.

Cailin Crockett is a UCLA student majoring in Spanish and Political Science, with a concentration in Political Theory. Earlier this year, she was awarded the CSW Constance Coiner Award, which is given to an outstanding student who demonstrates an active commitment to both working-class and feminist issues and involvement in community activities for social change.