CHAPTER 11

Honoring Our Mothers the Domestic Workers

Salvadoran Student-Community Organizing in California

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On May 8, 2011, members of the Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios (USEU), a Salvadoran student-led organization active from 2006 to 2016, organized a community event honoring the hard work of women in the domestic workforce—an event dedicated to acknowledging the lives and work of many of their own mothers. This event was titled "Reconociendo a nuestras madres trabajadoras: Celebración para el Día de las Madres."[1] It was organized as a Mother's Day celebration, with the added goal of bringing awareness to the organizing efforts and advances accomplished by the California Domestic Workers campaign. This event was organized collaboratively with the California Domestic Workers Coalition as a strategic effort on behalf of USEU to enhance student-community organizing. By focusing on a specific informal work sector that reflected the everyday reality of the Salvadoran community—that is, working mothers in the domestic workplace—the students in USEU were able to gain the trust of the community and simultaneously open a space for dialogue that challenged the racial and gender hierarchies in the workplace in California. In retrospect, what made this event truly unique and revolutionary was the amount of unyielding unconditional love invested by the student organizers in materializing the event, as well as the considerable amount of positive feedback from the community. In

this chapter, I argue that USEU modeled a form of student-community organizing that, by centering their working-class families, particularly women in the domestic workplace, actively challenged institutionalized racism and sexism in a space that traditionally undervalues and invisibilizes the labor of migrant women of color. By doing so, USEU contributed to dismantling a long history of invisibilizing women's labor and empowered a large and important sector of the Salvadoran community in California to take action and demand better working conditions and benefits as migrant workers with a right to dignity and respect. By hosting innovative community events like "Reconociendo a nuestras madres trabajadoras," USEU encouraged students and their community to heal from years of family separation and trauma through an ongoing legacy of student-community organizing practiced by the Salvadoran student movement in El Salvador.

The Reality of Migrant Mothers and Its Effects on Salvadoran Youth in the United States

Contextualizing the reality of the transnational Salvadoran community in the United States is important to fully understand the impact of the USEU event (figure 11.1). Salvadorans make up the second largest Latinx population in California and the third largest Latinx group in the United States, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Most Salvadorans residing in the United States migrated during the 1980s, a period of civil war in El Salvador, and have since settled and started families, with children born in the United States. Migration patterns also led to the development of transnational families, which is why California now has the second largest Salvadoran population in the world (Rodríguez 2009, 6). This phenomenon has had such a large impact on the reality of the Salvadoran community that Salvadoran nationals living in El Salvador often refer to Salvadorans abroad as members of "Departamento 15" (Rodríguez 2009, 7), a symbolic name for those who live outside the fourteen departments that encompass the Salvadoran state. Many of these migrants continue close ties with their family members and friends back in El Salvador, yielding the development of transnational community networks, or social networks, which are utilized by new migrants looking for support

Figure 11.1 California Domestic Workers organizers on Capitol Hill. Left to right: Jessica Gomez, Nancy Zuniga, Balmore Membreño, Mike Valle, and Breena Nuñez. Photo by Jessica Gomez.

and job opportunities (Menjívar 2000, 23). Unfortunately, these networks are often met with a negative reception for being migrant. Salvadorans were, and have continued to be, denied access to basic services during their early arrival, even though they were fleeing a U.S.-funded civil war (Menjívar 2000, 77).

Cecilia Menjívar best discusses the development of Salvadoran immigrant networks in her book *Fragmented Ties*, where she notes the development of "gendered networks" that result from Salvadoran migrants becoming heavily dependent on their "overburdened friends and relatives" to find work opportunities (2000, 158). This is important to acknowledge when discussing the realities of working-class Salvadoran women, who made up a large portion of the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties.

During the civil war in El Salvador (1980–92), most men were expected to join the armed struggle, forcefully or voluntarily through the military or the guerrilla movement. They had to depart from their families, thus leaving the women in charge of the household. This inevitably

led to a society in which most post-1980 households were headed by working-class women who had to maintain their children as single parents. This reality transcended borders: Many single mothers who were unable to make ends meet in El Salvador migrated to the United States, often leaving behind their children and families in search of better job opportunities, leading to family separation and the formation of transnational families (Abrego 2014). Arriving in the United States, Salvadoran women were almost immediately introduced to gendered networks, or informal exchanges between community members, which separated men and women by exposing them to "gender-appropriate" jobs (Abrego 2014). Salvadoran immigrant women were often forced into either the garment industry or domestic work (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001, 77). This is especially true for the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, which over the past several years has continued to grow, as more economic migrants and refugees flee El Salvador's neoliberal capitalist expansion (Osuna 2020). They include a new generation of youth composed of the children of the diaspora (Abrego 2017). For the Salvadoran community, the largest generation of youth born and raised in the United States began to come of age at the turn of the twenty-first century, including first-, 1.5-, and second-generation youth.[2] Many scholars have begun to delve into analyzing the implications of this new generation to predict how they will influence U.S. culture and society both demographically and politically. A negative stigma prevails within the greater Latinx community in the United States, however, that criminalizes and marginalizes Latinx youth as culprits of delinquency related to gangs and undocumented migration; thus, the Latinx community more broadly is forced to face these mainstream perceptions and defy them despite the lack of resources provided to them. This reality is especially daunting for Salvadoran youth who, upon coming to or growing up in the United States, find themselves being assimilated into Mexican and Chicanx culture, the dominant Latinx community in the United States, especially in California.

Thus, Salvadoran youth face a racialization process that continuously assumes that they are Mexican descendants and must either "assimilate" or resist assimilation in an attempt to maintain their fluid Salvadoran identities. This is especially difficult for youth who must also adapt to new family dynamics, given the migration patterns of their parents, sib-

lings, and other family members. This has led to some resentment between the children left behind and the parents who migrated and faced prolonged family separations (Abrego and Menjívar 2011). Abrego and Menjívar discuss the effects of immigration laws in the United States, specifically how they affect children's upbringing and family dynamics in the household upon reuniting (or separating) families based on legal status. The laws have led to *mixed-status families*, which refers to families with some members who are documented and some who are not, including children. Abrego and Menjívar (2011, 14) contest that this often leads children to misinterpret their parents' love because their parents/mothers are able to provide more available resources to their documented family members/children versus those who are undocumented. Among their findings, Abrego and Menjívar (2011, 19) discovered that children who were left behind by their mothers tended to be more reproachful toward them than toward their absent migrant fathers. This might be because children and young adults have internalized the role of their mothers as caregivers; thus, when mothers leave, they feel abandoned. This holds true for youth who could never be reunited with their mothers because of their mother's limited job opportunities, immigration status, and living conditions. Hence, the reality for Salvadoran migrant mothers and their children at the turn of the twenty-first century is a complicated relationship that varies dramatically on socioeconomic conditions, immigration status, possibilities for family reunification, and the lasting effects of rebuilding family relationships when changes in family dynamics occur.

This complex family migration history was a pervasive reality for many USEU student organizers who lived or grew up in migrant households in California. Among respondents to the USEU Memoria Histórica Project, roughly 90 percent of students involved in USEU reported growing up in working-class families, and 100 percent indicated growing up in immigrant households with one or more parents born outside the United States. Moreover, many of their mothers, as heads of households, were also employed as domestic workers. This reality, in many ways, is what propelled student organizers in USEU to eventually pursue active student-community organizing with the California Domestic Workers Coalition.

Students Support Domestic Workers: Challenging Gender and Racial Dynamics

USEU was born from a pressing need for a space specifically designed for Salvadoran youth that would facilitate dialogue about the youth's varying realities as children of the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States. The student-led organization sought to rescue the Salvadoran community's history and identity to empower said community to act and transform the conditions that continue marginalizing them. In the process of conducting oral history interviews with more than seventy USEU students, it became clear that no one single narrative effectively captures the reality of all Salvadoran youth, since their reality varies depending on the material conditions in which they grew up, which also varies on intersecting identities across race, class, and gender. Thus, the organizing strategies discussed and practiced by USEU varied in response to the needs of the students and the Salvadoran community in light of these intersecting identities. The purpose of this organization was to empower the youth by exposing them to the dark and conflicting realities that define the Salvadoran community, to generate political consciousness, and to encourage youth to serve the community.

One of the most difficult challenges USEU organizers faced was contesting the very unit that brought Salvadoran youth into the United States in the first place: transnational Salvadoran families. Most parents of Salvadoran youth in the United States discouraged their children from becoming involved in student organizations like USEU because of the implications student organizing has had throughout Salvadoran history (Portillo Villeda 2016). Prior to and during the civil war, student organizing was considered an act of defiance against the government establishment and was often associated with active militancy and dangerous political actions. This perception of student organizing coupled with the fragmented generational ties between Salvadoran youth born or raised in the United States and their migrant parents led to even more complicated family dynamics, making it difficult to do outreach and organize university students. Balmore Membreño, a first-generation Salvadoran university student and member of USEU Cal Poly Pomona, shared his migration story and context of reception upon entering the United States. Membreño was born and raised for most of his childhood and adoles-

cent life in El Salvador with his brothers and grandmother. His biological mother came to the United States when he was still an infant; he had no recollection of his mother (who could not visit him while she was in the United States because she was undocumented). He "met" his mother for the first time when he was fourteen years old, after she arranged to bring him and his two brothers to the United States legally. Membreño recalls meeting his mother for the first time and not "feeling anything" because he did not recognize her, let alone know her. To him, his grandmother had always been his mother because she was the one who had raised him in El Salvador. Thus, Membreño's relationship with his mother has been one of building a relationship from scratch and fostering a new identity upon becoming a U.S. resident, but an identity that still strongly resonates with his Salvadoran roots.

Mayra Joachin, a 1.5-generation Salvadoran university student and member of USEU-UCLA, shared a similar story. Joachin was born in El Salvador and lived there until she was seven years old, when her parents legally brought her into the United States. She was separated from her parents for most of her infancy and early childhood, and when she came to the United States, she was surprised to find out that she was no longer an only child but rather had a two-year-old U.S.-born sister. At first, Joachin recalls being confused by her "new family" and baby sister and wanting to go back to her grandmother in El Salvador. Unlike Membreño, however, Joachin was young enough that she was quickly able to adapt to her new family and adjust well. Both Membreño and Joachin have similar yet different migration stories that defined their realities and identities as Salvadoran youth in the university. The importance of highlighting the lives of both these young Salvadorans is that they were among the most active members in USEU, who contributed to the manifestation of USEU's mission and goals. They both took refuge in USEU as a space that allowed them to reclaim their Salvadoran identity and learn more about the history that they were denied upon migrating to the United States.

By creating a space where Salvadoran youth could reflect and discuss their real-life experiences, USEU allowed students to make the linkages between their unique experiences and the process of forced migration as a result of greater structural changes due to globalization. Hence, by encouraging Salvadoran young people to acknowledge these distinct family

Zuniga first formally introduced the California Domestic Workers campaign to USEU at its 2011 annual student conference, "Atravesando Fronteras: Formando Nuestra America," where students became genuinely excited about the campaign and asked to get involved.[4] Prior to that, however, Zuniga pitched the idea to USEU's Central Coordinating Committee, the statewide decision-making body, to formally endorse the campaign by writing and signing a letter of support to assembly member Sandré Swanson. By doing so, USEU became the first student organization directly affiliated with the Domestic Workers campaign in California.

After jumping on board with the campaign, USEU faced the challenge of how to organize statewide to collectively work and support the campaign. This turned out to be one of the most meaningful projects that USEU endorsed as a student-led organization. Talks about putting together an event to bring awareness to the campaign began immediately, and USEU organized Domestic Workers Awareness Month in May 2011, when all eleven USEU chapters across the state of California—including UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside, UC Santa Cruz, Cal State Los Angeles, UC Santa Barbara, Cal State Northridge, University of San Francisco, San Francisco State University, UC Davis, and UC Merced—hosted awareness events and dedicated meetings to learning about AB889, distributing flyers about the Domestic Workers campaign, and hosting community talks about the campaign.[5]

USEU's biggest success, however, was collectively organizing a statewide event called "Reconociendo a nuestras madres trabajadoras: Celebración para el Día de las Madres," which was a Mother's Day event organized to bring together USEU members' working mothers, most of whom happened to be domestic workers. Although the event was introduced as a celebration, it also doubled as a space to shed light on the advances of the Domestic Workers campaign. Even though the event was open to all working mothers, it specifically targeted Salvadoran women in the domestic workplace, given their high concentration in this workforce. For many students involved in USEU, this was a reality for their mothers and family members, who worked currently in the domestic workforce or had at one point in their early migration history. For example, of the mothers and community members who registered for USEU's Mother's Day event, 68 percent indicated that they worked as housekeepers, 13 percent as caregivers, and 16 percent as nannies (Cárcamo,

unpublished 2011).[6] This correlates directly with a survey taken in 2001, which estimates that approximately 20 percent of all Central American women work as household labor (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001, 77). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) further supports this with her analysis of Latina immigrant women's experience in the domestic workplace, arguing that it is predominantly orchestrated by a new world order of domestic labor that focuses on keeping and maintaining Mexican and Central American women (mostly Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran) in this specific sector of work.

The Mother's Day event was largely aimed at using motherhood as a gateway into a discussion about the harsh realities domestic workers face and to point out that this common gendered occupation throughout the Salvadoran community needs to be transformed for the better. The event, at its core, used students' motivation and love for their mothers to organize the workers being directly affected by, as Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) articulates, the new world order of domestic labor, which aims to maintain the lifestyle of the contemporary white middle class through invisibilized women's labor. It was an event aimed at recognizing and honoring the hard work of these women, which is typically never formally acknowledged. According to Zuniga, "It brought mothers together on those premises that we don't only love you, we don't only appreciate you, but we also appreciate the work that you do outside of the home" (USEU Mother's Day event, May 2011). The message that came across to the USEU mothers was that although society sees the work they do as invisible labor, it is nonetheless labor that keeps the world going, and the students honor and appreciate that work.

The organizing of this event was nothing short of inspiring because it was unlike any other that USEU had hosted. Given the negative sentiments among family members toward student organizing, coupled with the complicated family relationships many Salvadorans migrants experience in the United States, it was an extraordinary achievement to have family members and mothers not only present, but also actively engaged and moved by the activities and speeches. Ultimately, USEU was able to take the first step in bridging the gap between student and community organizing by tapping into a source of inspiration and motivation, which made the process not only easier, but more impactful than it would have been otherwise—openly expressing love toward family and community to bring unity across generations. Zuniga, the main organizer and direct

link between USEU and the Domestic Workers campaign, was especially moved by the organizing efforts:

> I saw something very unique. . . . I saw something else in organizing this event, and I'm saying not in myself but in other people. I think that if anything the love that was put into this event was huge because it made people move practically mountains to get this event to come together . . . and it was USEU statewide. And I feel that that's why it moved me so much because I was representing the coalition more than USEU and basically saying that this is what needs to get done and everyone in one way or another was trying to make it happen. (Zuniga, May 2011)

By opening up in this way and expressing genuine sentiments of love toward their families and community, USEU members were able to pave the way toward a discussion that would overcome traditional barriers of animosity and silence within the Salvadoran community. USEU's political statement was that they recognized domestic work as honorable and dignified work, not invisible labor. This political stance challenged traditional gender and racial dynamics by openly acknowledging the fact that domestic labor is a gendered and racialized workforce specifically engineered to recruit Latina immigrant women (who are also disproportionately Salvadoran), through systemic racism and sexism resulting from forced migration and globalization. By acknowledging this work as dignified and by encouraging domestic workers to actively demand better working conditions through support of AB889, USEU's student-community organizing strategy challenged internalized gender roles and racial hierarchies, making this Mother's Day event a truly revolutionary act of love toward their working-class mothers and toward transformational change.

Empowering the Salvadoran and Latinx Community by Making Interpersonal Connections and Facilitating Political Participation

By organizing the Mother's Day event, USEU was able to effectively create a safe space for students and community members (family members, in this case) to engage in dialogue, thus empowering the Salvadoran

community toward potential political participation. The first step was making a direct link between students and the community, and the next step was fueling a discussion based on personal experiences in the workplace. During the event, there was a segment dedicated to shout-outs, during which students went up in front of everyone in the audience and addressed their mothers directly. In retrospect, it was this segment that provided the momentum for the entire event and the catalyst needed to overcome previous family precognitions about student organizing in the Salvadoran community. Zuniga was especially excited about this segment, which many later referenced as a "therapy session" that yielded family and community unification.

Zuniga explained, "When we opened the space for students to share their love for their moms there was so much that came out and I'm still amazed to this day that people felt that comfortable in that space—that alone is huge! Whatever it is that USEU put into that room was like magic, you know, it was great" (Zuniga, May 2011). What hit home for a lot of mothers were the connections students were making to their mothers' experiences and acknowledging how it led to their own formation, not just as university students, but as people who genuinely care about and love the community. Paulo Freire (2014) discusses the concept of *humanization* and asserts that love and care are pivotal and necessary components in generating political consciousness in the community. This occurred during this event. By acknowledging the work of their mothers as domestic workers, USEU students were *humanizing* (or adding human elements and making their experience personal) the labor being produced by their working mothers.

Herein, USEU openly challenged the traditional public-private political dichotomy, which typically reduces human work interactions to abstract processes and tasks. Steven Osuna, a member of USEU–UC Santa Barbara, gave a testimony to this effect at the event, where he proudly stated that he was the son of a domestic household worker:

> When I got to graduate school at UCSB, many could not believe that my mother was a domestic worker. They could not fathom that the son of a domestic worker is working on his doctorate. To those who could not believe it, I smiled and with pride I said, "yes, my mom cleans houses," and it's because of her hard work and dignity that I have accomplished

> my goals. These few paragraphs cannot begin to express the struggles that my mother has gone through as a domestic worker, but it is a start. My mother, the domestic worker, has been my backbone. Like many other children of domestic workers, I am proud of what my mother does for a living and believe that domestic workers like her deserve all the rights that any worker in the state of California receives. (Osuna, USEU Mother's Day event, May 2011)

USEU students were able to gain the community's trust by showing their appreciation and love and by making connections through their personal experiences.

After the shout-outs and testimonies, they were then able to bring about the discussion of the Domestic Workers campaign and its goals in pushing forward AB889. In doing so, the students became the facilitators of the discussion and asked probing questions, shedding light on the advances of the campaign, hence generating a process of developing political awareness and consciousness within the community. Mothers started joining the discussion, sharing their stories as domestic workers, such as wanting to ask for basic needs in the workplace but being unable out of fear of losing their jobs. One mother shared her story about being held *encerrada* (barricaded) for two months and then being dismissed without pay. Another mother shared that her friend was required to work on-call day and night as an in-home nanny and had to sleep on the floor next to the baby's crib every night just in case the baby woke up. At the end of the dialogue, Zuniga and other USEU students began discussing the basic demands of AB889, including a two-week notice of dismissal, living wages, and decent living quarters for in-home workers. Intrigued by the bill, the mothers requested more information, asking for ephemera to take home to share with their family and friends who were likely domestic workers. USEU mothers and community members left the event empowered by the momentum in the room and more knowledgeable about the Domestic Workers campaign and AB889. Carol Hardy-Fanta (1993, 38) best describes this form of political organizing as collective organizing focused on highlighting *interpersonal* politics. In doing so, the women were able to make connections and reflect on their daily lives by linking politics to the continued marginalization of working-class migrant women (1993, 38). This led to the women's curiosity to learn more,

spread awareness, and demand social change, which is, of course, a form of political participation.

The love and care that was put into organizing the Mother's Day event by the students in USEU was beyond what was expected on behalf of the campaign coalition and left a lasting impression on the community. This event was, without a doubt, a turning point in USEU's student-community organizing model, as it frontally challenged the difficult and complex realities that many Salvadoran students and families face. USEU was able to tap into a source of inspiration and channel it to begin a process of political consciousness within the community. That source was none other than the very *love* that students had for their mothers, families, and entire community. In doing so, USEU modeled a form of student-community organizing that effectively humanized and centered the lived experiences of their own families, their working-class migrant mothers, which actively challenged traditional gender roles and racial hierarchies within the domestic workplace. The link between USEU and the Domestic Workers campaign is a model and example of the type of student-community organizing that attempts to successfully bridge the gap between students and community, between academia and the masses.

Notes

1. "Honoring our hard-working mothers: A celebration for Mother's Day."
2. The term *1.5 generation* refers to immigrants who immigrated into the United States during their early childhood and have been raised and lived a majority of their lives in the United States. *Second generation* refers to youth born in the United States to migrant parents.
3. Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California translates to Institute for Popular Education in Southern California.
4. The conference title translates to "Crossing Borders: Forming Our America."
5. See photos in Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios's albums on Flickr, accessed November 8, 2025, https://www.flickr.com/photos/190950187@N05/albums/.
6. Some women work dually as housekeepers and nannies, or as housekeepers and caregivers, which is why the percentage may add up to more than 100 percent.

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