

# LIBERADA O LIBERTINA

## Changing Gender Roles of Latina Immigrants in the US

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Although migration between the US and Mexico contributes to the AIDS epidemic, there is little information on the effect of migration on gender norms and sexual practices in receiving cities in the US. Further, the culture and values from the country of origin may clash with the culture of the country of destination. For Mexican and Central American migrants traditional patriarchal and familistic orientations might conflict with the more individualistic and egalitarian values prevalent in the US. Interventions that are not grounded in an understanding of gender and social context are unlikely to be successful. The purpose of this Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was to develop a lay taxonomy of gender roles effected by the migration of Mexican and Central American women to the southeastern US which can be used for the development of gender specific interventions. **Method:** We used a descriptive case study design to report on the perceptions of a Latino CBPR group *Horizonte Latino* to identify the impact of migration on gender norms in the Latino community. Data generation methods included notes and taped transcripts from CBPR meetings (over a 2 year period), participant observation, as well as individual interviews with CBPR members (N= 14). An initial coding scheme was developed based on review of the data using each meeting and individual interviews as the unit of analysis. Data were sorted further and displayed in matrices to facilitate data organization and comparison across meetings and interviews. Credibility was enhanced through a cycle of critical reflection, dialogue and revision of the taxonomy with the CBPR group. **Findings:** The CBPR members described the changing roles of women as they settled into the US. Although they did not label them as such, they identified important concepts, defined them and looked at relationships between these concepts and risk for HIV. For example, the men and women agreed on categories describing recently immigrated Latinas including the *tradicional* (traditional), *liberada* (the independent woman), and *libertina* (the woman that has gone too far). However, men and women interpreted this taxonomy differently. The men felt that a woman coming alone to the US was the main factor that influenced movement across categories from *tradicional* to *liberada* or *libertina*. Women's age was not important in itself but the age of coming to the US was. Teenagers who went to school in the US were thought to be more likely to become *liberadas*. The female participants suggested that women often "wake up" to their potential once they migrate to the US because there are more opportunities for them here. Migration necessitates that women enter the workforce, and the female participants saw working and earning salary as a liberating experience for women. A woman who doesn't work "has no right to have an opinion," and women characterized as *tradicional* generally do not work. However, a *liberada* does earn a salary and thus, has a say in household decisions. Although, there were some differences in the male and female participants' views, both men and women agreed on the categories and many of the attributes. **Discussion:** The men's views that women migrating to the US alone may have different characteristics than those coming with their partner or family is of interest given that the majority of men migrate here alone to earn money for their families. This is consistent with Connell's Theory of Gender and Power (1987) in terms of division of labor and suggests that women coming to the US by themselves may be atypical within the context of migration. Further, the movement of women from traditional to *liberada* based on immigration, as a teenager is consistent with the views of acculturation and the timing of migration in that individuals coming before adulthood. The view of the female participants highlights the importance of economic factors related to gender power and is also consistent with the Theory of Gender and Power (Connell, 1987), wherein the individual with the most resources in a relationship (for example, educational and economic) is likely to have decision-making control.

### Purpose

To develop a lay taxonomy of the gender roles of Latina immigrants in the US in order to inform the development of lay theories of health and illness and the development of interventions to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

### Design & Methods

We used a descriptive case study design. Data generation methods included notes and taped transcripts from group and individual interviews.

### Setting & Sample

The study was conducted over a two-year period with a Latino Community Based Participatory Research group, *Horizonte Latino*. The group included 18 members, four from academia and 14 from the community. Sixteen of the group members were Latinas; all community participants were first generation immigrants.

Individual interviews were conducted in participants' homes and group meetings were conducted at a Latino community advocacy agency in an urban southeastern city.

### Analysis:

The academic team members developed an initial taxonomy of Latina gender roles following preliminary analysis of transcripts from the group interviews. The taxonomy was then presented to individuals and gender based groups on 3 x 5 cards with three categories and 24 attributes. Participants were asked to relabel categories, add, and change attributes or move attributes as needed for agreement. They were also asked to describe their reasons for making the changes. Data were sorted further and displayed in matrices to facilitate data organization and comparison across meetings and interviews. Credibility was enhanced through a cycle of critical reflection, dialogue and revision of the taxonomy with the Community Based Participatory Research group.



## “They come here in long skirts really submissive to their husbands and suddenly after six months here, they are using short skirts.”

### Findings

The men and women agreed on three categories for immigrant Latinas:

- ♦ *Tradicional* (traditional)
- ♦ *Liberada* (the independent woman)
- ♦ *Libertina* (the woman that has gone too far)



### Taxonomy: Beginning of Lay Theory

#### Selected Results of Initial Taxonomy

Traditional	Liberada	Libertina
Wears long skirts	Wears short skirts	Wears "micro" mini skirt
Doesn't know how to drive	Knows how to drive	Drives around w/ men or girlfriends
stays home most of the time	Goes out of the house	Leaves kids alone to go out and party
Husband makes decisions	Makes decisions w/ husband	Doesn't think about consequences of decisions
Doesn't take English classes	Takes English classes	Doesn't care about education
Never confronts partner	Feels comfortable bringing up issues w/ partner	Doesn't care what partner thinks
Behaves same way in US as in country of origin	Works outside the home, but also takes good care of family	Only thinks of herself
Doesn't go out alone, only w/ partner	Often goes out without husband to work, shopping, or clinic	Leaves partner to find someone better
Very reserved	"Wakes up" to her potential here	Drinks and smokes cigarettes
Husband pays all household bills	Husband or wife pay bills	Spends money on things for herself she can't afford
Doesn't talk about condoms	Will talk w/ husband about condoms	Carries condoms in her purse

### Selected Results of Taxonomy by Women

#### Changes to Taxonomy Made by Women Participants

Tradicional	Liberada	Libertina
**Stays home doing house work	*Doesn't care what partner thinks	**Mini skirt: wording changed to "micro" skirt
*Makes decisions w/ husband	**Carries condoms- this depends on situation	
*Doesn't care about education	**Leaves partner for someone better- this is liberada if there is domestic violence in her relationship	

\* item was moved; \*\* item was changed

### Selected Results of Taxonomy by Men

#### Changes to the Taxonomy made by Male Participants

Traditional	Liberada	Libertina
* Wakes up to potential in US	*Leaves partner to find someone better	
***Stable sexual partner	***May change sexual partners but will not have several partners at same time	***Multiple sexual partners
***Attends church on regular basis and keeps religious traditions	***Goes to church on special occasions	***Seldom goes to church- sleeps during the day
**Husband pays all household bills: Although the husband usually pays bills, some traditional women start helping pay bills when they get a job in the US		**Behaves same way in US as in country of origin: Some libertine women may have already been libertine in their home country
Doesn't take English classes		Doesn't care about education

\* this item was moved; \*\* this item was changed; \*\*\*this item was added

The attributes "Doesn't take English classes" and "Doesn't care about her education" were moved out completely from the attributes list by male participants because they did not define any one category.

### Moving, Adding & Dropping Attributes

#### Female participants:

- ♦ Requested further specification on *carries condoms in her purse*. A woman who takes condoms with her on a weekend getaway with her partner is a *liberada* while a woman who takes condoms with her to a bar on a Friday night in the hopes of meeting someone is a *libertina*.
- ♦ Moved the attribute *she doesn't care what her partner thinks* from the *libertina* category to the *liberada* category on the grounds that *liberadas* will seek out opportunities for education and personal growth, regardless of their partner's opinion.
- ♦ Moved the attribute *she makes decisions with her husband* from the *liberada* category to the *tradicional* category.

A *tradicional* woman is closely connected to her husband...under his protection. She doesn't think that she can even make a decision on her own.

- ♦ Both female and male participants moved the attribute *she leaves her partner to find someone better* from the *libertina* category to the *liberada* category. Women placed this attribute in the context of domestic violence.

If your partner is hitting you, abusing you physically or psychologically, you should leave him for your own safety and well being and finds someone better for you.

Male participants spoke of *liberada* women as being freed from the yoke of their husbands' authority.

Once they are liberated, they may see that their partners are not good for them and find someone who is better.

#### Male participants:

- ♦ Moved the attribute *wakes up to her potential here* from *liberada* to the *tradicional* category. They interpreted the text as meaning that a woman must be asleep to "wake up here." Therefore, she would have to be *tradicional* (asleep) to have the capacity to wake up.
- ♦ Added two new attribute, *religious practice* and *sexual partners*

### Discussion

The taxonomy outlines a lay understanding of Latina gender roles. In this taxonomy, gender roles are described as falling under one of three categories: Traditional, liberada and libertina. Male participants viewed movement between these categories as influenced by whether a woman immigrated as adult or teenager and whether she was alone, with a partner or with family. The female participants highlighted the importance of economic factors related to gender power. This emphasis is consistent with the Theory of Gender and Power (Connell, 1987), wherein the individual with the most resources in a relationship (for example, educational and economic) is likely to have decision-making control. The development of a lay taxonomy of gender roles is an important step in understanding the gender and migration related factors affecting sexual practices among Latino immigrants to the US.