

**Older Immigrant Women Who Work: Building Resilience,
Changing Perceptions and Policies**

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Photograph by Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha, 2016

In a time when social tolerance is being challenged, discrimination against older immigrant workers is on the rise. In this troubling social climate, people migrate from place to place in search of refuge, safety, economic opportunity, and employment. In 21st Century America, immigration, both documented and undocumented, is a highly controversial topic. In 2017, there were more than 44.5 million immigrants in the United States, which means that one in seven U.S. residents is foreign born.

There are four main ways to enter the U.S. legally: through a family relationship, employment sponsorship, humanitarian protection (refugees or asylum seekers), and the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery. While immigrants come to the U.S. from around the globe, many

legal immigrants come from Latin American countries in which there are ongoing struggles with widespread poverty, corruption, gang violence, and social inequality. A large number of undocumented immigrants enter the United States each year; every year, in fact, one million of them join the 10 million undocumented people already working in the United States (Sladkova, 2007). Mexicans and Central Americans account for roughly 67 percent of unauthorized immigrants, about 16 percent come from Asia; six percent from South America; five percent from Europe, Canada, or Oceania; and three percent from the Caribbean and Africa. Most unauthorized immigrants came from Mexico (53 percent), El Salvador (six percent), Guatemala (five percent), and China and Honduras (three percent each) (Zong, Batalova, & Burrows, 2019).

People are living longer as the world is aging, and so are immigrants who are both legal and undocumented. In the last 20 years, the population of older immigrants in the U.S. has increased by 70 percent or from 2.7 million to 4.6 million (Population Reference Bureau (PRB), 2013). Older Latinos account for one of the largest increases in the older immigrant population (PRB, 2013). In 2030, they will constitute 22 percent of the older population, compared to 8 percent of today's older adults (PRB, 2013). To understand the personal and economic needs of aging immigrant workers, it is important to explore the challenges and supports that enable older working immigrants to maintain their well-being, particularly when they age in homes far away from their home countries, their extended families, and their support systems.

In this chapter, we explore the concerns, stressors, and resilience of older Latina workers. Even in the best of circumstances, immigration and acculturation are stressful processes. When older immigrants are faced with discrimination compounded with possible health concerns associated with aging, the stressors are magnified. For older Latina immigrants, the difficulties may be compounded further as they face these difficult challenges while aging in a cultural

framework that is very different from where they expected to age, in a social and cultural environment that may be alien and hostile to them.

While some immigrants, mainly from Asia and India, can be described as “the American Success Story,” the majority of recent immigrants are “people of color” who leave their homes seeking economic opportunities for themselves and their families. Many of these immigrants hope to eventually to return “home” so they might become elders in their own communities and villages. This hope is one that is not often realized. Frequently immigrants must confront the social, physical, and existential issues of aging and dying in a culturally alien environment.

Numerous factors determine the adaptive success of new immigrants. The intersecting factors of language competence, cultural familiarity, education, economic conditions, health status and access to health care, and the presence (or absence) of social and emotional support all shape the immigrant experience at any age. Older Latina workers are particularly vulnerable, they often toil at low paying jobs with little security or economic protection. Like many other immigrants of all ages, these working immigrant women must also confront increased anti-immigrant discrimination. Their day-to-day lives are filled with stress and anxiety. They are fearful of being victimized, which, in turn, has a negative impact on their well-being. As will be discussed later, there is a dearth of social policies that support older workers, particularly older women immigrant workers. Their stories need to be told. Well-being across adulthood, particularly in later adulthood, is shaped by the intersecting influences of personal, spiritual, social, environmental, and cultural circumstances. In this chapter, we discuss how these factors shape the life of Marta, an older immigrant woman from Ecuador. As the case of Marta illustrates, personal and social factors shape the stories of immigrants to the United States or elsewhere.

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Marta is 61 years old. She comes from a large farming family in rural Ecuador. In her youth, she aspired to be a nurse, but her family fell on difficult times. She and two of her brothers needed to leave home to find work to support the family. She first arrived in the United States as a visitor when she was in her early twenties. She worked briefly as a Nanny for a well-to-do family who supported her desire to learn English. They helped her find free English classes in the evening. After one year in residence, Marta returned to Ecuador and applied for a visa to return to the United States. Somehow, she was determined to make the move to the U.S. When her visa was granted, she returned to America and moved in with a cousin. She found work as a house-cleaner, she worked long hours, many of them on her hand and knees cleaning house after house. The ongoing physical labor made her ache with pain. The cleaning chemicals she had to use bothered her sinuses. Even so, she persevered.

Her dream was to start her own cleaning business. She continued to live with her cousin to save money. As she accumulated savings, she had several setbacks, family members asked her to help pay their way into the U.S. On one occasion, she gave a family member \$5000, on another occasion \$10,000. These costs depleted her finances, but she did not resent aiding her family. In addition, she also regularly sent money to her aging parents and aunt. Eventually Marta met a Mexican man. In Mexico, he had been a teacher. In America, he painted houses. Luckily, Marta was able to obtain permanent residency status through her husband because he was a green card holder. They married and had two children. In time and with much persistence, Marta started her cleaning business and hired teams of house cleaners. Several of her employees are undocumented

workers who have been in the U.S. since early adulthood. Marta has struggled to pay her employees decent wages. For many years, Marta did not have health insurance, which meant that neither she nor her husband scheduled regular check-ups. Eventually they purchased health insurance so that their children would have benefits. The additional expense created considerable family stress. Now in her sixties, Marta is still reasonably healthy. Her husband suffers from Type 2 Diabetes and is no longer able to work regularly. Marta's business, though, continues to generate enough income to support the family.

Not all is well, however. Years of manual labor has left her with chronic back pain and knee problems. How will she and her husband, she wonders, manage in their old age when they are no longer able to work? Neither she nor her husband have earned social security benefits and because of the continued support they have both been obliged to provide to their extended family in Ecuador and Mexico, they have not been able to save sufficiently for retirement. Marta has no plans to slow down now, but she hopes that her children who are now in working and going to Community College will be able to help support her as well as two of her siblings who still live in rural Ecuador and need regular help.

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Marta's life story illuminates the dynamic social and cultural tensions that are often at work in transnational families. She represents an example of someone who has relied on personal strength and resilience to survive and thrive. Marta has demonstrated the ability to cope with stressful life experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). She has managed to confront the

numerous obstacles that life placed on her path with reasonable optimism, now as she approaches later life she is still optimistic and views life positively.

Social science research has linked resiliency to a predisposition to ward off illness—even in adverse and stressful environments (Bonanno, 2005). For psychologists, resilience devolves from the notion of hardiness, which includes personality aspects of commitment, control, and challenge (Bartone, 2007; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982). Resilient individuals such as Marta tend to use adaptive strategies to cope with difficult life circumstances. People like Marta also are less likely to become depressed or anxious and as such they are also less likely to experience burnout (Shatté, Perlman, Smith, & Lynch, 2017).

Marta, and women like her, have had to confront a set of difficult choices between personal concerns and individual freedom and between individual desire and family obligation. Marta has successfully managed to cope with the demands of her family because she loves them and appreciates the support she receives in return. Mutual social support is helpful to people of all ages, but it becomes particularly important with older adults. The limited research that considers the well-being of aging Hispanic immigrant women suggests that they struggle with difficult work conditions, the absence of benefits and health insurance, and considerable fear and anxiety over their immigration status (Hyunjeong, Eunsuk, & Wenzel, 2018). Even legal immigrants such as Marta have become fearful. Despite these very real problems, we have not heard their stories in the social science literature. As the case of Marta illustrates, older immigrant women all too often find themselves among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of American society.

Like Marta, many Latin American women immigrated to the United States to escape poverty and provide a better life for themselves and their families. Many older immigrant

workers arrived in the U.S. and like Marta, struggled with language ability, lack of education, and a lack of cultural competence. Most of them worked hard in various low-paying insecure jobs year after year. Generally, Latina immigrants tend to arrive in in the United States during young adulthood and while some have successful careers and adequate health care, many do not (Escobar, Nervi, & Gara, 2000).

It is important to note that while working immigrant women overall have a diverse socio-economic profile in the workforce, most of them struggle at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. A lifetime of discriminatory treatment tends to block their upward mobility. As a disadvantaged group, older working immigrant women also become victims of the intersecting prejudices of age, gender, and immigration status (Friedman, 2012). With age, the cumulative stressful effects of low- paying and physically challenging jobs begin to have detrimental effects on their health and well-being. Historically, immigrants to the U.S. live longer and tend to be healthier than native born Americans (Markides & Rote, 2019; Riosmena, Kuhn, & Jochem, 2018). This trend, however, is changing, as the “healthy immigrant effect” appears to be dissipating. Years of difficult labor conditions, discrimination, and lack of access to health care has resulted in an aging population that is struggling with acute and chronic health conditions. Later life may also lead them to isolation, loneliness, and increased caregiving and responsibilities for other family members (Treas & Mazumdar, 2002).

Well-Being, Resilience, and Control

Throughout her struggles, Marta has maintained a degree of control over her life circumstances. Now as she is adapting to age related changes, she also struggles to adapt to physiological, social, and environmental changes. One of the most important factors that determines individual reaction to the social environment is a person's perception of resilience, competence, and control (Troy, & Mauss, 2011). The attempt to maintain a sense of competence and control in one's life is an important challenge for people of all ages, but older immigrant women may be more at risk for loss of resilience, competence, and control, especially as they face the possibility of poor health, economic challenges, and discrimination (Escobar, Nervi, & Gara, 2000; Guruge, Birpreet, & Samuels-Dennis, 2015).

One threat to the well-being of aging immigrant working women is social isolation (Stepoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013; Tahmaseb McConatha & Volkwein-Caplan, 2011). Social isolation is characterized by feelings of exclusion from the socio-cultural environment. The risk of social isolation increases with age, especially if accompanied by discriminatory treatment and powerlessness. Feeling socially isolated can result in further physical deterioration, mental illness, and even premature death. The key defense against social isolation seems to be networks of social support and the existence of resources, a network that has helped Marta. Many immigrants have left their families behind and lack the support they need during difficult and stressful times. Personal and social resources develop and maintain feelings of integration. Support and services serve as buffers against the negative effects of stressful life events (Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). As Marta's case illustrates, close family relationships can serve as a buffer in difficult times (Rook & Charles, 2017).

Hobfoll, Freedy, and Geller's (1990) social support resource theory considers how people obtain and protect their personal and social resources. In times of stress, these resources are perceived as buffers because they provide a person with a sense of control in a chaotic situation and help manage feelings of pain and anxiety. Friends and family can be very helpful with everyday stressors. Having access to such support can help older working women feel more resilient and competent in coping with aging related changes (Vassilev, Rogers, Sanders, Kennedy, & Blickem, 2011). Many working immigrant women, who do not have access to the personal, familial, and economic resources that Marta worked hard to develop and maintain, may find themselves feeling helpless and socially isolated.

The Interplay of Inequalities

As shown throughout this chapter, older immigrant women's experiences are influenced by a confluence of factors, including race, class, immigration status, age, and gender. Most immigrant working women in the U.S. today are likely to come from minority groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds. They are likely to have less formal education and not to be proficient in English. These conditions exacerbate their disadvantaged status and leave them vulnerable. Race, class, and gender are typically the three factors highlighted in intersectionality studies (e.g., Calasanti & Giles, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). In addition to these variables, widespread ageism leads to further exclusions in the political, social, cultural, and economic realms. As argued by Calasanti (2003), to be old is to be socially excluded from full citizenship. Being an immigrant adds a myriad of additional structural barriers, including, but not limited to, the constant threat of deportation, disadvantages in the labor market, as well as lack of access to health care.

In addition to these barriers, older Latina immigrants like Marta are likely to experience discriminatory hostility. Many immigrants, especially those from Central and South America, are often cast as aliens who are unable or unwilling to assimilate (Garcia 2017). Garcia's study of Mexican American women shows that they are often assumed to be undocumented, regardless of their immigration status. Even documented immigrants are often likely to be seen as 'illegal' because the public overestimates the number of illegal immigrants. Those who look and speak differently are likely to be identified as being in the country illegally. In reality, lawful immigrants accounted for about three quarters of the foreign-born population. Fewer than half of Americans, however, know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally (Cohn 2017).

This popular perception of illegality is closely linked to the public discourse of immigrants from Latin American presenting a threat to national identity (Chavez, 2013). According to this popular narrative, immigrants from Latin American, unlike previous generations of mostly European immigrants, prefer to be linguistically and socially isolated (see for example, Huntington, 2004).

This rhetoric contributes to shaping people's views about immigrants and also has implications for how immigrants and U.S.-born Mexican Americans feel about their own social position and sense of belonging (Massey & Sanchez, 2010). For example, a 2018 Pew Research Center Survey (Lopez et al., 2019) indicates that 51% of Latino and Latina immigrants have serious concerns about their place in America. This is also reflected in the reality of their lived experiences. The same Pew research center study reveals that nearly four in 10 Latino and Latino immigrants say that they have experienced discrimination, for example, being victimized and criticized for speaking Spanish or being told to go back to their own country.

How can the impact of these multiple barriers to economic success and well-being be reduced? In terms of successful aging practices, the factors typically discussed focus on the importance of maintaining physical and mental health, strong social relationships, as well as civic and community engagement. These important factors are addressed in this book. In the remainder of this chapter, we highlight the importance of public policies tailored toward the needs of older adults, women, and immigrants, as well as the significant role public discourse plays in shaping how others perceive immigrants and how this shapes their self-perception and feelings of resilience and vulnerability.

Immigration Policy Prescriptions for Aging Immigrant Workers

Ageism in the workplace is widespread. Despite the ADEA [Age Discrimination in Employment Act] (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2019) prohibiting employers from making employment decisions based on age for more than 40 years, age discrimination remains a pervasive force in the workplace. While its most blatant forms like mandatory retirement and maximum hiring ages are distant memories, more subtle forms still exist. These sophisticated forms of age discrimination suggest that while employers may overtly attempt to comply with the law, stereotypes about aging continue to taint their practices.

The most common misconceptions about older workers like Marta are that they are less productive, more expensive, less adaptable and more rigid, and that they do not really want to work but would rather retire as soon as possible. This cultural climate of ageism in America is so firmly entrenched that it is virtually impossible to avoid the social and professional pitfalls of this kind of widely acceptable discrimination. While civil rights protections such as the ADEA offer some very limited safeguards to older working adults, they offer little to no recourse to immigrant women who are more likely to work in jobs that are physically very demanding and

where age may well affect their ability to perform. In a similar vein, Title VII protections against discrimination based on race, sex, national origin or religion often do not offer protections to immigrant women. Currently, this legislation only applies to employers with more than fifteen employees; thus, it does not cover many workers employed by small farms, businesses or households. Employers can also circumvent this legislation by classifying their workers as independent contractors.

None of these policies applies to legal and illegal immigrants who work in the informal economy where exploitative and illegal practices abound. Such hiring practices allow employers to ignore prohibitions on hiring illegal workers and avoid minimum wage laws and insurance requirements. Domestic and care work is one of the employment sector most affected by this practice. Moreover, even if documented immigrants perform this type of work, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act does not cover them. Thus, many domestic workers face slave-like working conditions; they are not protected from racial discrimination and sexual harassment, have no right to days off, overtime, or paid leave.

Forty-five percent of private household workers are immigrants with lawful immigrants slightly outnumbering unauthorized immigrants (DeSilver, 2017). Ninety-five percent of these workers are female. A federal Domestic Workers Bill of Rights would go a long way in addressing the concerns of these workers. Such legislation has already been passed by eight states, it addresses the right to overtime pay, breaks, sick leave, it guarantees the protections mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administrations, the right to form unions and contains recourse against harassment and discrimination. In addition, it would increase access to retirement benefits, thus greatly expanding immigrant women's economic safety net.

Changing the Narrative about Immigrants

Any attempt to address the system of oppression faced by older immigrant women like Marta also requires the reframing of the immigration debate. There is much research attesting to the fact that the public often holds conflicting and fragmented attitudes on many issues and that public opinion can greatly vary depending on how the issue is defined and interpreted (e.g., Callaghan & Schnell, 2005; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Ryan & Gamson, 2006). Research on framing effects first analyzes the dominant frames created by the media and other political elites. This is typically followed up with an experimental approach which examines the impact different frames have on how the public perceives the issue.

Haynes, Merolla and Ramakrishnan's (2016) comprehensive analysis of media coverage of the immigration issue from 2007 to 2016 documents that frames differ starkly between news organizations in ways that reveal their political leaning. Mainstream and liberal media outlets were slightly more likely to avoid the term "illegal," in favor of "undocumented." The latter term was the language of choice for more conservative media outlets. In terms of coverage of the issue, mainstream and liberal media generally focused mostly on human-interest stories, many of them involving children. On the other hand, conservative media sources such as FOX news prioritized statistics about illegal immigration and often used the 'amnesty' frame, invoking the image of immigrants breaking the nation's laws.

The body of research on the framing of immigration politics suggests that policy frames can have a profound impact on public opinion (Haynes et al., 2016, Lecheler, 2015). Exposure to language portraying immigrants as law-breakers seeking amnesty led to more support for deportation and other strict immigration measures than immigration coverage based on human-interest type of stories. On the other hand, research participants who were exposed to stories highlighting the plight or contributions of individual immigrants displayed more support for

legalization. Frames which described the DREAM act by referring to immigrants who came over as young children was particularly effective in decreasing support for strict immigration measures (Merolla, Ramakrishnan, & Haynes, 2013).

This research suggests that there is ample evidence that the framing of the immigration debate matters. Nevertheless, it also shows that the success of framing in order to change the hearts and minds of Americans is limited because it requires exposure to varying frames. Ample evidence suggests that citizens have migrated to the ends of the liberal-conservative scale and that people select the media environment that is most supportive of their political views (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Conservative media are the dominant choice of conservative citizens; more liberal leading members of the public are more likely to be attracted to media sources such as CNN or MSNBC. This selective exposure to different media influences the types of frames consumers receive and reinforces already existing attitudes. This effect is only likely to strengthen, as consumers are increasingly able to customize their news content.

Similarly, negative perceptions of older adults in the media are pervasive (Adams-Price & Morse, 2009; McConatha, Schnell, & McKenna, 1999) and attitudes about aging are also impacted by framing (Busso, Volmert, & Kendall-Taylor, 2018). This means that exposure to examples of frames which includes counter-stereotypic descriptions of aging and older adults can lead to reductions in negative stereotypes and age bias. This suggests that there are significant opportunities for communicators and advocates to shape the public's perceptions of the aging process and older adults.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the plight of older immigrant women and detailed the intersectional prejudices of age, class, gender, and immigration status on their well-being. These

factors often result in the economic, social, and cultural marginalization. The case of Marta, the Latina immigrant from Ecuador, demonstrates that social support systems can alleviate much of the stress associated with her marginalized status. We also argue that if barriers to the economic success are to be lowered there should be an increased advocacy for public policies that are friendly to the aging immigrant population. Lastly, cultural change requires a symbolic reframing of the immigration issue that not only underscores the resiliency of immigrants but also highlights their contributions and sacrifices. The difficulties of the aging experience are confounded by discrimination. Structural circumstances faced by older immigrant women can threaten their psychological and physical well-being and lead to isolation and loneliness. Economic factors are resulting in women and men working longer years often well into the seventies. As the workforce ages, it is important to develop awareness and sensitivity to the negative consequences of ageism and other forms of discrimination.

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