Female Gang Members from East Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

East Los Angeles cholas are the female counterparts of the cholos, the latter the street gang members that come from marginal situations and conditions. While there has been little research on female gang members overall, the role of females in the street life is significant. Sisters, girlfriends, and other relatives share the same backgrounds as male gang members but additionally carry on traditions of their own. Female gang cliques sometimes operate alongside the males, but mostly they are auxiliaries to the established gang. Domestic violence plaques the females but they also occasionally participate in street violence. Social life revolves dating, courting, partying, and sexual encounters and here females play a pivotal role. Dress, make-up, and other customs distinguish females from males in the street life that is the gang world.

Keywords: Gangs membership, female gangs, street life of L.A.

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Introduction

The large majority of Mexican American gang violence and crime stems from male gang members, and for this reason, research on female gang members has been relatively scarce (Curry 1995; Garland 1996). Figures vary, but it has been calculated that anywhere from 4-6% (Vigil, 2002) up to 15% of gang members are females (Miller, 2002, 2001; Chesney-Line and Sheldon 1992; Maxson & Whitlock 2002). Street gangs in the United States, and probably elsewhere (Hagedorn 2007), are the result of marginalization, that is, the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where isolated social and impoverished economic conditions result in powerlessness (Hayden 2004; Blanc, et. al, 1995; Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst, 1998; Geis 1965). There is a broad linking and sequencing of these factors that shows the additive and cumulative nature of the emergence of gangs and the generation of gang members.

Marginalization particularly affects children in the aftermath of massive immigration of ethnically distinct populations, when large numbers of ethnic minorities must find employment and a place for their families to live in an urban setting. They start off in poor areas and low status occupations. Such a beginning affects family structure and stability, schooling readiness in the context of language and cultural differences, and level of involvement with police and the criminal justice system. This process occurs on many levels as a product of pressures and forces in play over a long period of time (Esbensen, Tibbetts, & Gaines 2004). The phrase "multiple marginality" reflects the complexities and persistence of these forces. As a theory-building framework, multiple marginality addresses ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological factors that underlie street gangs and youth's participation in them (Vigil, 1988a, 1988b, 2002; Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 2006). Gender is an additional marginalization factor and this article will elaborate on some of the key features of how street females manage their way through the mostly male gang world (Miller, 2001; Valdez, 2007; Chesney, Sheldon, & Joe 1996; Campbell, 1991; Moore and Hagedorn, 1996; NIJ 1994).

It must be underscored, that most girls who are gang affiliated are less involved in the violent aspects of gang activity that capture the spotlight in public discourse (Giordano 1978). Males dominate in the area of gang violence, and in the hanging around and drug dealing enterprise. Females, the mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and associates of male gang members are the focus of this study. Our data is based on an ethnographic study of a housing project (Pico Gardens) in East Los Angeles of three years duration

(Femon 2004). Over sixty females were observed and interviewed, but this article concentrates on a dozen or so cholas (the female word for cholo, a male label, which reflects marginalization) from that population; the larger community study included other females and over 35 male gang members (Vigil 2007). However, the data from that study are bolstered by information gathered from more than four decades of observations and investigations in other communities' harboring similar gangs. This information improves our understanding of the role of females in low-income communities generally as well as how street socialization affects them. Street socialization is the process that characterizes poor youth who grow up on the streets, with little or no home and schooling guidance or supervision.

Methods and Research Locale

The escalating prevalence and heightened negative life consequences suffered by young gang affiliated women demands that their various roles as members of gangs, communities and families be clarified and situated in the current context (Kontos et.al 2003). Access to these girls, to gain rapport and cultivate gender sensitivity meant adjusting the fieldwork strategy in which two community researchers and I were interviewing residents of Pico Gardens. My student at UCLA, Beth Caldwell, additionally obtained more specific ethnographic information for this study by conducting participant observations for a period of one year at a community-based violence prevention and intervention program located in East Los Angeles. The program serves and employs residents of local public housing projects located in an area that is densely populated with gangs. Research was conducted not only in the program's office but also in different community settings; specifically, at social events, in the local parks, and in people's homes. This not only facilitated researchers' participant observations of cholas, but also their natural interactions with male gang associates, as well as other persons in their family or community. Supplemental information was obtained through informal, but recurrent, interviews conducted with twelve girls ranging in age from twelve to twenty four. Attention was focused not only on girls involved in gang activity, but also on male gang members, younger children, and other members of the community. This strategy was specifically employed in order to secure the most complete, comprehensive understanding of the community possible; including the subtle nuances underlying the various perspectives on female gang involvement.

The Role of Females in Gangs

The female roles in the overall construction of the gang are significant (Valdez 2007; Brown 1977). The girlfriends, sisters, mothers, sexual partners, and homegirls of gang members are not merely passive auxiliaries to the males. Indeed, females serve supportive functions, and , among themselves, leadership roles (Fishman 1988). A significant number of gang involved women and girls suffer long-term, serious consequences due to their criminal behaviors. This has resulted in their increasing representation in the penal system (OJJDP 1996). According to a prison official interviewed by one of my USC students, Diane Rodriguez (1990), an estimated 80% of the inmates at a women's correctional facility in Los Angeles are incarcerated for gang-related crimes.

Even though there have long been cholas, pachucas (female equivalent of pachuco, a style of the 1940s associated with the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 {Mazon, 1984}), and other street level female participants, the recent growth in female gang activity can be attributed to a variety of factors. In the past, Latina immigrants have been successful at resisting the pull of street involvement and affiliation with gangs. However, there is currently such a crush of people in neighborhoods struggling under the strain of overwhelming poverty, that the rhythms and routines of acculturation for immigrants are similarly compromised. Thus adaptation to such settings has made it more likely that girls might join gangs. In part, such developments in Latino gender habits have accounted for why first-generation females can now be socialized outside of the home and away from the watchful eye of elder females. Additionally, gangs have become deeply rooted fixtures whose longevity in the historical context of disempowered groups reinforces a tenuous legitimacy (Short and Strodtbeck 1965). This has ultimately served to normalize the gang presence in many communities and thus bring about more gang involvement by wayward youth. These recent changes have weakened the stigma that kept large numbers of girls from participating in gangs in the past (Kontos et. al 2003). Moreover, girls who are raised in families with a gang orientation, not surprisingly, often grow up to participate in gangs; and as the longevity of gangs has grown, so has the number of such families. For these girls, home socialization to gang ideals precedes street socialization to gang practices.

Most interestingly, research reported on gang girls is framed in terms of what male gang members say about them; the males in offhand boastful

ways talk about *their* perceptions of the girls' sexuality, promiscuity and, of course, their dominance over them (Miller 2001). Gang girls' contradictory and clearly conflicted relationship with gender equality and deviance deflecting behavioral norms is most evident in terms of their sexual identity. Due to societal double standards governing the sexual norms of behavior for boys and girls, the girls have been stigmatized for their sexual activity much more than their male counterparts. Promiscuity, for instance, has often been presented as a character flaw of individual girls and not the result of a specific set of social conditions that act on, or interact with a persons' autonomy (Franzes, Covey, & Menard 2006). Challenges, when raised in opposition to male-dominated gender inequalities dealing with sex or group status often provides little relief, as this disrupts their relationships overall (Fleischer 1998). Furthermore, sexual activity is merely one aspect of their lives, as many cholas work at home or in unskilled jobs.

Courting, dating, and partying with the homeboys at night, and/or during the weekends, constitutes the major part of their time. Even so, violent girls do hold a more deviant status than males who have similar patterns of behavior; in short, they stand out. The most aggressive girls of a community are well known, not only among the gang, but to law enforcement officials and the general community as well. The stigma attached to any sexuality in opposition to traditional expectations of femininity, even for violent cholas, is a sanction with surprisingly diffused social implications. One day police apprehended a chola who lived outside of the projects but still spent a great deal of time with the local gang. At the time of the arrest, a major physical altercation ensued. The incident prompted law enforcement to charge her with the serious, violent offense of assaulting a police officer with a deadly weapon (she had a knife on her). The police also identified her as a gang "shot caller" because she had a long arrest record consisting of drug use, abuse and probation violations. Shot callers are usually experienced male individuals, of considerable status, who coordinate drive-bys and other premeditated, violent retaliations. While undoubtedly aggressive, there is little at the outset to suggest that this chola held such a high gang status. Furthermore, her prior record, while lengthy, was inconsistent with that of a shot-caller, for her offenses were all non-violent, victimless crimes. Yet the sanction against her, however questionable or disingenuous, was deliberately and swiftly imposed for daring to employ an alternate, brazenly aggressive gender identity.

Female Gang Typology

There are three major types of female gangs: autonomous female gangs, female gangs which are auxiliaries to male gangs, and mixed gender gangs (Moore et. al 1995). The majority of female gangs are either auxiliaries, or tangential associates. The latter are subcultural criminal enterprises with an institutionalized power hierarchy arranged according to traditional masculine contexts. Male dominated gangs tend to exist first, and only later do women fashion their own cliques within the organization of the gang (Miller, 2001; Valdez, 2007; Moore, 1991; Campbell, 1991). Female cliques generally last for a shorter amount of time than those of the male gang. Among Chicano gangs, there are typically age-graded cliques that divide all of the members (Klein, 1995). By and large this organizational characteristic transcends gender; cliques for females are separate but some girls also enjoy simultaneous inclusion in male cliques. Although a well-established phenomenon in gang literature, none of the females in this investigation of the local clique, claimed dual membership. Most females in Latina gangs, including our current respondents, self-report as female cliques affiliated with a male gang (Miller, 2001).

In the community of Los Angeles, where Chicanos dominate the gang landscape, and where almost all observations for this project were conducted, *only one* autonomous female gang was recognized. Unfortunately, this clique was no longer in existence during the fieldwork of this study. The area was already home to many old Chicano gangs, and although the girls who formed the gang were the girlfriends and sisters of cholos from other neighborhood gangs, they did not ally themselves exclusively with one gang. The girls frequently enjoyed partying with male counterparts from other barrio gangs. However, these females existed entirely independent of traditional masculine power contexts and with little outside interference into their autonomy. One gang girl, a high school student who simultaneously belonged to this all-female gang, explains:

> *Yeah, there used to be this all girl gang--The H Girls. They knew my brother was from a gang, so they wanted to get me into their neighborhood. I'm telling you, every day when I got off the bus from school I would have to take off running. They would be chasing me trying to jump me so I could be from their neighborhood...*

An all-girl, Latina gang in the neighborhood proved to be the exception, rather than the norm. Another girl recounts:

There used to be this neighborhood that was all girls, but they didn't last that long.

One older woman, a long-time neighborhood resident, alludes to the composition of female cliques as a function of girls' relationships with male gang members, whereby fulfillment of one or some potential need specifically encourages auxiliary-type structures. For example, as girlfriends or sisters of male gang members the regular emotional interactions among them and the male members were further tightened when deviant activities became routine and normative. As this comment implies:

We don't really ever see the things like you see on TV with those gangs that only have girls. No...our gangs are mostly the guys and then some girls with them .

The life span of the all-female clique was unusual in terms of their brief existence. The circumstances which enable gangs to exist, flourish, and even sustain members over multiple generations are readily available to the current girls of the Pico Gardens clique.

The situation where a female is invited to join a male clique is not uncommon. However, insofar as this status is a privilege reserved for only the "downest" of homegirls, most girls recount similar stories of introductions to gang participation involving relational or structural motivations. Even so, it is typical for girls to employ initiation rituals that involve some violence, such as jumping girls into the female clique.

Reasons for Girls in Gangs

Many of the reasons girls give for joining gangs are the same as those for boys. This is particularly so when considering common problems which affect gang membership on a structural level, especially the multiple marginalization that so completely envelops them. The poverty and isolation of many barrios, poor educational systems that cannot cater to the culturally specific, multiple needs of minority youth, and a host of potential familial problems are overwhelming in themselves. When combined with the seemingly permanent nature of the fixture which street gangs have become, as effective socialization agents of many low-income neighborhoods, the weight of all the factors is almost insurmountable. Many are compelled to join the gang for support and friendship, particularly when such support is missing in the family. For both male and female

youth, the gang compensates for that which is missing in their lives; it serves as a surrogate family, providing friendship, companionship, protection, identity, and entertainment.

Moreover, a socio-cultural factor such as the process of acculturation, which is particularly important in relation to the Mexican-American community, further marginalizes a group of children. These children find themselves caught between two competing cultures, and made vulnerable in this betwixt-and-between situation, seek other means of cultural adaptation and relief. Stress alone from both poverty and the acculturation process take their toll. Strain inherent in navigating economic and social realities of a new country add to the stress, doubling the pressure. Given that girls as well as boys are affected by these fundamental sociocultural strains, they too look to gangs to find a substitute for these ambiguities. Girls are arguably more marginalized than boys because in addition to facing the ordinary obstacles of their class and race, girls also face an additional threat from gender obstacles and the resultant inequalities. These gender barriers show how females are devalued and dominated not only by society but, also, sadly, by their own homeboys.

In his classic 1927 study, Thrasher points out two major reasons why girls do not join gangs: cultural traditions and closer supervision. He explains, *"First the social patterns for the behavior of girls, powerfully backed by the weight of tradition and custom, is contrary to the gang and its activities; and second, girls even in urban disorganized areas, are much more closely supervised and guarded than boys. Furthermore girls are usually well incorporated into the family groups or some other social structure"* (Thrasher, 1927). In Latino communities, girls are, above all else and without exception, expected to be in the home where, ideally a male member of the family is charged with the moral, sexual and (latently) religious protection of the households' females. This arrangement has evolved into the traditional patriarchal practices employed, in a somewhat subconscious manner, by elder (preferably male, though not necessarily always so) Mexican family members who adhere to the values underlying the cultural significance in preserving a girl's all-important feminine virtue. These traditional arrangements imply the internalization of an accepted and unchallenged feminine identity based, at least in part, on an almost absolute rejection of street life due to enduring pervasive, negative connotations.

Obviously gangs represent a culturally resistant separation of and break from the sometimes-stultifying constraints placed on immigrant Mexican families' stringent cultural beliefs. Clearly the traditions observed by many immigrant families, who feel morally justified in engaging in defiant

oppositional challenges to contrary American cultural permissiveness, succeed in keeping many girls out of gangs. Unfortunately, parental insistence on the strict adherence to one cultural value, so plainly irreconcilable in terms of the other choices, places enormous strains on girls attempting to successfully maneuver the dangerous shoals of both. The additive tensions of cultural dissonance can cause some youngsters to join gangs. Traditional expectations of parents seem confining to many children of immigrants who grow accustomed to the more liberal gender norms of mainstream American society. Parent's expectations seem too conservative to many girls, forcing them to look elsewhere to find alternative ways in which to express their burgeoning gender identity. These traditional expectations act upon many Mexican American women as an internal barrier, shielding them from participating in street life. However, for a minority of girls who do become involved in street life, traditional values actually work against them, helping distance them from cultural moorings. They are labeled because of their street involvement, suggestive clothing, make-up and hair style choices which reflect a "street style" and, as a result, are susceptible to becoming socially isolated. Traditional values protect most young women, but decreasingly so for girls from "cholo" families. These girls bear the chola label in a deeply personalized, stigmatizing manner even before their involvement in the deviant subculture. Thus, social sanctions may be exacted on them early on and some may not have the individual fortitude or social opportunities necessary for them to recover. Pushed into this role some become active as a matter of course. Since they are already socially isolated with the unshakable label of deviant, they rationalize fulfilling these lowered expectations, by simply joining the gang.

Family life has been found to be perhaps the single most important factor in differentiating youth who join gangs from those who do not (Vigil, 2007). Although the family situations of both male and female gang members are often problematic, girls, clearly, tend to come from even more stressed family situations than boys (Gosselin, 2005; Moore, 1991). Immigrant families attempting to adjust to a new culture, as well as the hardships endemic to family poverty, can completely undermine parental control in many cases; because of the diffusion of chola/gang culture to Mexico, there are even instances when females arrive in the United States essentially "pre-socialized" to chola/street-like behavior. Unsettled family situations can also contribute to individual psychological problems within family members. Such individuals might already have emotional problems. Additively, this can stir a predisposition to more serious and costly, both economically and emotionally, expressive mental health disorders. A worsening or intensification of deviant, or precocious sexuality in these

instances can be the result. In addition, strain of this sort can produce a recalcitrant rebellion with equally extensive and far-reaching consequences. The delinquent and much feared "loca" (female version of loco; a practitioner of locura, a gang mental construct denoting a type of quasi-controlled craziness) behavior of cholas is, in many cases a reaction to an emotionally disturbing home life.

Not only do girls who join gangs generally have more problematic family backgrounds than male gang members, they also tend to come from less traditional families. The less traditional in nature the families of girl gang members, the more likely girls would become gang members, especially for the second generation; this is similar to the case with males (Vigil, 1988a; Vigil, nd.). Moreover, many girls become involved in a gang through family members who are themselves gang members. The association of other family members to the gang perhaps normalizes the gang in the eyes of the family, thus making girls' affiliation in cliques appear more benign than the seriousness of the situation warrants.

For example, a twelve year old who already claims to be from a gang, began declaring the neighborhood because her two older brothers were active in the gang life. She reflects about being scared as she listens to gang members" talk and walk by her window at night. She has gotten into numerous gang related fights that she has instigated by asserting to be from the gang. She explains that her two older brothers, both of whom are currently incarcerated, taught her "to be down for" the neighborhood. Her thirteen-year-old homegirl is in a similar situation as she followed in the footsteps of her uncle. At ten years old she had already been given a gang moniker, and later, at 17 she was arrested and charged with being the driver in a drive-by shooting, even though it was a spontaneous occurrence and she was unaware that an older male front seat passenger was carrying a gun that he pulled out and used. Unwilling to divulge his name to law authorities, she is now doing 15 years in prison; sticking to the code of the gang, "*no ratas*" (don't rat on fellow gang members), she showed herself to be a good homegirl.

Another 19 year old in one of the gang families of this study, explains it in this way:

> *My uncles, my cousins, my boyfriend, and my brothers are all gang members. It [joining the gang] was normal for me.*

The participation of other relatives in a gang makes it more acceptable for a female to become involved, especially in a culture in which female gang involvement is generally scorned.

The majority of girls who become involved in gangs have been victims of physical and sexual abuse; the perpetrators of this abuse are frequently family members (Gosselin, 2005). The psychological trauma and repercussions of such abuse lead many to the gang for emotional support and protection (Valdez 2007). Fifty to seventy percent of delinquent girls at a Los Angeles female probation camp have been victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, according to intake records (Mehren, 1996). Additional research which corroborates Mehren's findings indicates upwards of 70% of girls in correctional settings have been past victims of physical or sexual abuse;. girls are more likely to have been victimized in this way than males (Maniglia, 1996). In fact, 71% of the victims of sexual abuse in our society are women (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). Thus the experience of sexual brutalization, especially for the girls who endure these types of traumas at very young ages, compromises their continued, healthy emotional development. Tiny, a girl who defines herself as a "gangbanger" explains:

> Finally it got so bad in my house that I just left. I couldn't take it anymore with my step-dad and everything. Now that I look back on things, that was a lot of why I was down in the projects everyday just kicking it. I never wanted to go home. So I would just be out on the streets getting shot at, getting budded out [smoking marijuana], and kicking it with my homeboys.

Despite her renowned fighting abilities and seemingly tough exterior, Mayra, a girl who was involved with gangs for years, becomes noticeably timid when speaking of her father:

> I was always so scared of him...and of what he would do to my mom...My dad used to try to sexually abuse me. The first time he did it I was 13...And the last time he did it I was 18 or 19. That's when I moved out...but I didn't want to then. He had so much power over me. I was scared of him. He still tries to tell me what to do--like he's the man in the house, but I don't even listen to him anymore because he's just freeloading. I'm the one who pays rent...I'm the one who pays all the bills. It wasn't good for me-- living in that house. Now that I look back at how I used to be I regret a lot of things...I was out there 'cause of my dad.

For victims of abuse, joining the gang is an attainable, immediate form of self-empowerment; it is an attempt at surviving and escaping, even if only

temporarily, unbearable situations at home. This is particularly the case in areas where gangs flourish, places that tend to have meager resources and limited recourses available. For these girls, there are no alternatives to violence, mistreatment or abuse in some form. Their social and economic marginality compounds and greatly increases their victimization (Valdez 2007). Originally they were powerless over choices made by family members to victimize them. Now, as they "choose" to remain home, join a gang or put themselves in any other potentially vulnerable situation, they will eventually have to confront their lack of autonomy. Their quandary is to become (more) involved in the gang as opposed to passively remaining complicit in the continuation of their mistreatment.

Overall, girls who have been victimized have no safe places for retreat; they have no close family or (non-gang) friends with whom they can stay (Chesney-Lind 1992). Already feeling rejected by mainstream social institutions, it is not surprising that many girls turn to the gang to provide the assistance they need to escape from abuse. In a sample of gang involved youth, one third of the boys had run away from home at least once whereas three quarters of the girls had done so (Valdez, 2007; Moore and Hagedorn, 1996). A large number of gang involved girls run away from home multiple times, which is an unequivocal indicator of dysfunctional home lives. One girl explains:

> *My homies will always find me a place to stay when shit gets too bad at home.*

Many also turn to the gang for emotional support and comfort, as well as an overall sense of acceptance. One such girl explains:

> *We're like one big family. If they do wrong to my homegirl or homeboy it is like doing wrong to me and it hurts (Quicker 1983: 24).*

Another girl says:

> *They were always there for me. I wouldn't have made it without my homegirls.*

Street gangs, like any other group, are involved in shaping or producing one's individual identity. Linking one's identity to the gang is a way to gain pride and self-respect. Girls repeatedly bring up the importance of gaining respect through their gang membership. According to one chola, an important aspect of being in a gang is "to be someone."

Sadly, many girls who turn to the gang for protection from domestic or sexual abuse continue to be abused by "homeboys" in the gang (Valdez 2007) Even worse, many of them are oblivious to the abuse, as they don't consider the rude and sometimes dehumanizing treatment from the guys as abnormal.

Real and Ideal Gang Roles

Gang ideals and expectations of sex roles are narrow and rigid. It is no small irony that they are shaped, in many ways, by home country cultural traditions. In East Los Angeles, masculinity is defined by "machismo" behavior, emphasizing the dominance and assertiveness of males. Femininity is characterized by submissive behavior. Most females are given a subordinate status, so that they are rarely in leadership positions. As women strive for independence, male demonstrations of dominance appear to be increasingly important, and rise as women become more independent. Due to the fact that it has become socially acceptable for women to work, many women are no longer dependent upon men for financial support as was formerly the case. If they have children and are a single parent, women can also qualify for welfare, thereby furthering or even maintaining their independence from males. Overall, women are currently in more powerful positions than before. With this shift, displays of male dominance, overt demonstrations of men's power, become increasingly more important for the self-respect of the boys themselves. Particularly given that masculinity is defined by the assertion of power, their identity is threatened by women's rising power in society. Thus, obvious displays of male dominance might be attempts to define and reassert their own identity and masculinity.

Gang norms in many cases perpetuate a state of male dominance. A male's reputation is reflected in his ability to "keep his lady in check", controlling her behavior and keeping her from the streets. Stigmatizing girls who violate gender norms works to reinforce male dominance both in the gang as well as the community. Attempts at male domination, notably dehumanizing women by treating them as though they are mere sexual objects with little purpose other than for the pleasure of men, can best be understood in terms of power. Such male dominance is probably rooted in the traditional Mexican gender ideals of "marianismo" and "machismo."; whereby the ideal behavior for men is "machismo" or, more simply, to be dominant. In contrast, women are expected to accept men's dominance and, above her own needs, to value her family and husband. However, many of these girls have been abandoned or mistreated by men repeatedly in their young lives--fathers, boyfriends--and, thus decide to be more independent.

Rebelling against the abuse many women face as a result of the socialized passive acceptance of such roles, many gang girls reject such ideals. This tension over gender roles looms large in gang members' motivations and resultant behavior. Sexual identity plays an important role in deciding one's role within the gang. The way in which females choose to accept or reject traditional gender roles forms the basis for the division of "good" and "bad" girls. While most male gang members are sexually active themselves, very little attention is focused upon this aspect of their lives. In contrast, a disproportionate amount of attention is focused on the sexual activity of girls. The fact that sexually active girls are labeled "bad" whereas boys are considered normal for similar behavior, points to the double standard that is a part of both mainstream and gang ideology. Males offer respect to girls who show their faithfulness and loyalty to a boyfriend; such behavior conforms to the gang members' values and expectations for women's sexual actions. Women's status in the group can also be a reflection of the company she keeps. Particularly if one's boyfriend has a high status in the gang, the girlfriend immediately is shown respect and is considered to be in a higher position of power. One chola explains:

> *I always had respect from all the guys because I was Cesar's lady. They would listen to me.*

Most cholos desire to be with "good girls" as long-term girlfriends or wives. In the words of one Latina gang member from the Arizona Maravilla gang:

> *Cholos want girls that aren't in the gang, that are good, that will stay home and take care of the kids and not fuck around with a gang. They want pure girls.' (Moore et. al 1995: 31)*

The desire to have a "good girl" as a steady girlfriend or wife is an indication of the double standard by which women are judged, even by gang members. Whereas it is culturally acceptable for a guy to party and be active in gang activity on the streets, girls are vilified for doing the same as it is considered the woman's responsibility to stay home and take care of her children. A cholo from Los Angeles explains:

> *I don't want a girlfriend like those kind of girls. I want a nice girl who is smart and can talk to me and really understand my feelings. One that can take care of her family and everything. I don't want to be with one of them hood rats.*

Thus, gang girls can experience enormous difficulties attempting to strike an appropriate balance between projecting deviance and conforming to strict gender role norms underlying the straight, outside world as well as gang society. When a female finds she is being perceived and labeled deviant in both contexts, she is in the midst of what Campbell (1991) called the "double bind". This phenomenon is clearly a consequence of misogyny and inequalities.

Stigmatization and gender discrimination are prevalent even within the gang. A girl who used to be involved with gangs explains that many males see the girls in their gangs only as sexual objects:

> *They [male gang members] used to tell me, 'I don't have any homegirls-- just ho-girls.'*

The male perception of some women as mere sexual objects is unequivocal in one cholo's frank response to a question about the existence of prostitutes in his neighborhood:

> *No, we don't have any of those. But we got ones who do it for free.*

Yet when it comes to girls, male gang members think and behave in ways that are plainly contradictory; with seemingly little self-reflection or concern, they appear oblivious to the very existence of a problem. For example, despite stigmatizing these girls by perpetuating the notion that certain girls are "bad," often referring to them as "hos" or "hoodrats," male gang members are generally happy to have them around. They speak of them in derogatory words and judgmental voices, but are quite eager to go to parties where the girls who play the role of "sex objects" will be, whereupon they willingly and frequently engage in sexual relations with them.

The self-destructive nature of such girls, who are verbally and physically abused by males, points to the low self-image and desolation of the lives of many of these girls. Droopy, for instance, says of his lady,

> *"She's just a ho. I don't give a fuck about her. I'm just fucking her."*

Such verbal abuse occurs right in front of the girls the same as when they are not around. Their passive acceptance of such negative treatment truly reveals how little many of these girls have in their lives. Clearly girls' submission to this type of treatment indicates compelling evidence of the self-destructive nature of gang activity. Less clear, but no less destructive to

their interests is the boys' willingness to perpetrate the worst aspects of the gender double standard. Such interactions between males and females are, in a sense, a twisted enactment of the extremes of cultural gender role definitions: male dominance and female submissiveness.

Victimization and treatment of girls as "sex objects" occurs in a variety of ways. There are accounts of girls being forced to have sex with one or multiple members as a rite of initiation in order to join the gang. The practice of "training" girls reveals the extent to which objectifying and degrading women by dehumanizing them into mere objects of pleasure has so completely been incorporated, without thought or consequence, as an inherent part of gang norms. This term refers to a uniquely brutal expression of masculine identity and power assertion whereby as a group function, males have intercourse with a girl one right after another, all the while cheering each other on. This has been documented across regions and ethnicities as a fairly common practice among gangs. One male explains:

> *I'm going to be honest with you. We'll bust a train every once in a while...like at a party or something we'll take a girl into a room and...take turns.*

The male view of girls as sexual objects is very much a part of the gang lifestyle (Valdez 2007). Although the cholo valuation of females is based overall on domination and their own unmentionable insecurity and tenuous grasp on that power, they do appraise some girls. For instance, most males do not perceive or treat "tomboys" and many of the "good girls" with the same careless disregard reserved for the "sex objects." Somehow many feel justified in treating such girls badly. One cholo explains:

> *They're just hos anyway. We wouldn't bust a train on a school girl. That would be fucked up.*

Insofar as hierarchies can exist even among the quiescent on the fringes, gang girls who do not play the role of "sex objects" condemn those who do. Good girls and tomboys maintain a more favorable status position in part by exploiting the differences between themselves and the sex objects. Instead of questioning the basis of gender organizations, they reprimand the "sex objects" for being sexually promiscuous; blaming the girls/victims for instigating the sexual encounters.

At the opposite end of the female spectrum are the "tomboys;" these girls find and define their identities through their fighting abilities and presentations of "toughness." (Miller 2001: 181). One chola proudly explains how down she was for her barrio:

> When my brother was locked up I would bring him in drugs and everything. The guys he was locked up with would tell him "Damn--your sister's down.

A fellow gang member describes Loca, a girl with a reputation for fighting with guys and being just as tough as any of her homeboys, admiringly:

> We have this one chola who is just like a guy. She has a shaved head and everything. She dresses like a guy and has two tattoos of clowns on her neck. She's down. She'll throw it down with guys...she doesn't give a fuck.

Tomboys generally have the respect of male gang members; consequently their behavior patterns are similar to those of males. Many girls who act in accordance with this role feel closer to the males in the gang. They have adopted this role perhaps because of spending so much time with male gang members. One girl, who was incarcerated at the time, explains:

> I don't really hang around with girls, never did. I hang around with boys. I like going out a lot. I like messing around. I started using drugs.

It is apparent that gender status inequalities inhibit female members' ability to form cohesive and supportive friendships within their group. Their reactions, in fact, accomplish just the opposite by reinforcing masculine domination and hindering female empowerment.

The Chola Street Style

Due to their marginalized status within society, girls involved with gangs have developed their own, unique styles of dress and behavior. They adapt similar patterns of dress, speech, and expression in interactions with other people, which advances their identity as gang members (Fleischer 1998; Miller 2001) .

There are certain styles of dress, hairstyle, and makeup that characterize Latina gang members. Furthermore, patterns of dress do vary depending on role or identity in the gang. The style of clothing and the manner in which a

chola might coordinate her overall appearance tends to match one's role at a given time. For instance, when expecting a fight, some girls purposefully wear male styles of clothing. Other girls wear clothing to show that they do not belong to a gang. Girls who like to party often dress in ways that accentuate their sexuality, thus they tend to dress more provocatively than others. One cholo attempts to describe the style of his favorite "bad girl" chola:

> *The hoodrats wear those shorts that they cut real short so that...like... their cheeks are hanging out and everything. And they'll wear like those little shirts--I don't know what you call them.*

He goes on to explain that he enjoys "looking at girls who dress like that" but wouldn't want to be with someone who dresses like that as a girlfriend. Another girl speaks unabashedly of her preferred style of clothing for "partying" evenings:

> *Like if I'm going to party and get my scam on I'll wear like a little shirt and some Daisy Dukes (tight spandex-like, short skirts.*

More than their clothes, specific styles of hair and makeup define the chola style. In a recent study by Norma Mendoza-Denton, girls repeatedly emphasized the importance and meaning they attribute to make-up. She found make-up was not merely an ordinary cosmetic device for enhancing attractive facial features, but rather was one of the ways the girls created and expressed their street identity, crafting an outward appearance which outwardly revealed their inner sense of self. As one girl explains, it serves as a way of identifying a gang member: "If you want to know who's a chola, just look for the eyeliner (Mendoza-Denton 1996)." Moreover, for female gang members, putting on their make-up readied them for aggression; like warriors of the past they don their war paint to symbolize their ability and readiness to fight and intimidate others. In this way make-up is functionally bound to the production of power. According to another chola,

> *"When I wear my eyeliner, me siento mas macha (I feel tougher) (Mendoza-Denton, 1996)."*

For this girl, lining the rims of her eyes with the thick, black line of kohl, the look appropriated and distinguished by cholas, in a manner which purposely exaggerates a look to thereby harden her previously soft, round features, empowers her with masculinity-inspired bravado.

Make-up, as well as the other components of the chola style, serves as a mask, disguising one's individual identity and replacing it with the identity of "gang member." By developing a style unique to cholas, these girls have, in a sense, expressed their feelings of separation or exclusion from both mainstream American society as well traditional Mexican culture. Mendoza-Denton explores the importance of the style, declaring that it is:

> "*all focusing toward the same end: the articulation of a distinct style, different from their parents, who continually ask why their little girls must dress like this, when we have none of this in Mexico (Mendoza-Denton, 1996: 51).*

The clothing style, in a sense, reflects their desire to have "no part of" the female beauty aesthetic that otherwise occupies the imagination of mainstream society. The style goes along with the gang as a rejection of mainstream values, ideals, and life in general.

Tattoos are an important component of the urban street scene as well as the traditional chola style. Common tattoos include three dots in the shape of a triangle, indicating "mi vida loca" (the crazy life). Tear drops on one"s face is also common, the corner of the eye the preferred spot. Names of boyfriends artistically tattooed onto one's bodies as well as the name of the barrio are also standard chola designs. Oftentimes, these tattoos are applied after the initiation ritual. It is a gang entrance process similar to, but yet different from what males practice. Girls can be initiated via several pathways: they can be jumped in by females, or males, or just walked in.

Gaining Status

We have explored earlier research that presents evidence suggesting female gang violence is not a new phenomenon. However, the nature of such violence and the areas in which female violence is increasing are important to consider in order to better understand the lifestyles of these girls (Valdez 2007) Just as many fights between male gang members are about jealousy or possessiveness concerning girls, conflicts over guys spark the majority of girls' fights. Jealousy or competition for boyfriends or male companionship sparks many disagreements.

One of the ways females can gain prestige and respect from the gang is through fighting for their barrio. Guns have long been institutionalized as common-place features of male gang life. Its not surprising that in recent years homegirls intent on procuring status and respect through their

emulation of masculine aggression have adopted this dangerous accessory. Accordingly, one girl described her reaction to learning her best male friend had been shot by a member of a rival gang in terms of a strong urge for vengeance at (almost) any cost:

> *We were driving around looking for anybody from [that neighborhood]. My homeboy was driving and I was right there with the gun. We saw this fool from [that neighborhood] ...I came this close to shooting him...*

Another admitted her underlying thrill-seeking:

> *I like to start shit sometimes--ain't nothing else to do.*

Girls' involvement in violence is also a product of the intense deprivation and unrelenting physical, sexual and emotional abuse that the majority of them have survived. Coming from abusive family situations, many have learned to fight and assert aggression instead of dealing with problems and emotions in more constructive, less destructive ways (Gosselin 2005). Many girls continue to harbor residual feelings in the wake of their harsh lives. A fair amount also have a great deal of anger that is directed both towards their abusers as well as society at large; intense anger and frustration, especially when it is diffused and amorphous, unable to be directed appropriately, can lead to aggressive behavior.

Mayra, a much respected chola, admits that she carried a gun everyday in case her homeboys needed it; they knew where to find her if they needed a weapon. She would also hide their drugs and other weapons in her purse or bra when police or probation officers were near. These were not her only roles in the gang; she herself used the gun on a few occasions and was actively involved in many other aspects of gang activity. A former Chicana gang member explains:

> *I used to always be out there kicking it--hiding guns for my homeboys and getting shot at. One time my best friend gave me a gun he had just killed someone with, and I'm ashamed to say it but I got rid of it for him. I even knew the guy he had killed, but I didn't want him to get in trouble.*

The female affiliates, despite being disparaged by males' withholding equal membership status and the requisite respect to which they are clearly entitled, fulfill critical strategic functions that are often solely for the benefit of one individual gang member. It's no small irony then that their utility lies in large measure on their adept manipulation of the very gender role norms

that cause them such strain. For example, gang girls also sometimes function as bait for their fellow gang members. They set up rival gang members to be attacked by other members of their gang. These encounters with rival gang members usually occur on the weekends when street neighborhood gatherings and partying transpire. By talking to and flirting with a rival gang member, girls complete their part by luring a rival gang member into an area so that her homeboys can attack him. One male gang member explains:

> *I don't trust girls who I just meet now because they could be one of my enemy's homegirls. My homeboy got jumped the other day because of some jainas (cholo slang for girls). They were talking on the phone and the girl told him to cruise over to her pad. He was excited 'cause he was kind of sprung on her....but when he got there three guys from [another gang] were waiting there for him. They fucked him up.*

Sexual activity among gang-involved youth, both male and female, is common. This behavior has more long-term effects for women than men in that many have children at a young age. Although many fathers try to remain involved in raising their children, for a variety of reasons, it is the girls who generally take the more active role in raising the child. Becoming pregnant and raising children is an important part of the lives of most female gang members. Campbell (1990) found that 94% of female gang members will have kids in their lifetimes, and 84% will raise them without husbands.

Some pregnancies are accidents, but many are purposeful; the reasons why many wish to have children at a young age reveal a lot about the emotions of many gang involved girls. Many girls try to get pregnant for the same reasons that they look to the gang: to fulfill loneliness, to find the support they have been denied by their family and other social institutions, and to find love. To many, a baby represents someone to love and care for unconditionally. Their young lives have taught them a great deal about loneliness and the hopelessness inculcated when multiple "marginalizations" at the hands of family, lovers, friends, as well as society in general, are simultaneously at play. In general, a baby seems to be a cure to the loneliness--something that will bring meaning to their lives. They believe having a baby will (somehow) make them feel they have a purpose in life. Such needs and romantic notions reflect a life bereft of emotional security because of the social strains and voids they have suffered, preventing them from contemplating the long term consequences of their actions. One 19 year-old mother who has a one year-old baby illustrates this point:

Before I had Junior I thought he would be like a little doll to cuddle with and love me.

Unfortunately, the realities of childrearing for these young mothers will continue to be different from what they envisioned without addressing the underlying deficits and deprivations that contributed to their situations.

Another factor influencing girls' desires to have babies is that many feel that having a baby is a way of securing a long-term committed relationship with their boyfriend. In a world where women's relationships with men are often unstable, a baby represents a lasting bond between a man and a woman. Embracing this rationale for parenthood is also fraught with potential disaster. Having a baby can be an attempt on the part of girls to keep their boyfriend close and strengthen their bond. A seventeen-year-old girl explains:

If I have his baby, he'll be with me forever. It's a way to show how much we love each other. Like if he tries to use protection I get mad because it means he doesn't want me to have his baby.

The cholas who have been overwhelmed with the cumulative effect of multiple marginalization are most vulnerable to repeat this cycle. Clouded by the strains and pressures of life, they do not yet realize the implications motherhood, in a dysfunctional context, has for her own life and for her child as well (Maynard and Garry 1997). At the very least, gang girls must first gain insight into the extent to which masculine domination might be relevant to their situations.

The issue of "machismo," an important part of life particularly for Chicano gang members, also influences many boys' desire to have a baby. They sometimes see fatherhood through the lens of dominant masculinity. Thus in this culture where girls typically try to make their men happy, many girls will become pregnant if their boyfriend wishes them to do so. Many males show their love for a girl by wanting her to have his baby; however, the issue of pleasure is never far behind this motive, as one male stated that using condoms for protection doesn't feel as good.

A practical rationale for having a child is that many males surmise that they have short lives, as gang-involved youth have grown up surrounded by death and violence. Given the turbulent and frenzied nature of their lifestyles, many gang members don't expect to live to be very old (Hayden 2004). A seventeen year-old cholo revealed:

I'll either be dead or be doing life by this time next year.

Another young man echoed, "*I won't make it 'til I'm 21.*" It follows that many young men and women with such terminable expectations would want to have children while they can.

Having a baby can be a turning point in the lives of many girls. This event can cause them to become less active in the gang as they shift their focus to caring for their child. Moore found that 43% of the women in her sample said that having a child was a major turning point in their lives whereas only 19% of the males agreed (Moore 1991). In a subsequent study Moore explains, "for women, but rarely for men, the new responsibility associated with child rearing may speed up the process of maturing out of the gang" (Moore and Hagedorn 1996). Twenty-one year old Mayra corroborates:

> *That's when I changed--I kicked back a lot when I found out I was pregnant. Now that I have my son I have to think about him, I don't even party anymore.*

Conclusion

Young girls and boys, particularly in low-income urban areas, are growing up equally deprived. The multiple levels of their marginality have taken their toll. Both are exposed to violence and both endure many difficulties at young ages, with home and school having minimal influence as street socialization takes over (Valdez 2007; Hayden 2004). The strains and stresses which contribute to gang membership among boys and girls are similar: the general malaise of poverty, a rundown neighborhood, a lack of jobs, breakdowns of social control, and the continuing effects of racial segregation and discrimination (Klein & Maxson 2006).

Multiple marginality, the framework within which our analysis was conducted, helps us pinpoint and highlight the ways ecological and economic marginalization affect and intersect with social, cultural, and psychological strains and stresses (Oehme 1997: 133-134). These forces additively and cumulatively contribute to the breakdown of social control and the emergence of gangs and varieties of gang members. (See Vigil, 1988a for varieties of gang members.) It is these broader forces that create social control dysfunctions, disrupting family life, undermining education, and leading law enforcement, inevitably, to play a stronger role as society's "conformity" safety net. To fill these gaps (Klein, 1971; Vigil, 1988a, 1993;

Heath and McLaughlin, 1993), the gang replaces the parenting, schooling, and policing to regulate youth's lives to one of a street subculture where routines and regulations help guide gang members. The subculture that emerges varies somewhat between males and females, although as previously noted, there is a remarkable consistency in the major themes among them: multiple marginality, breakdown of social control, and even specific gang routines like initiation, tattoos and graffiti, and gang conflict.

Girls face further marginalization due to gender discrimination. They turn to the gang to seek refuge from this marginalization, rejecting traditional definitions of their roles in the process. Although seeking refuge in the gang from an alienating society, denying mainstream values and lifestyles, girls continue to be discriminated against by their male counterparts due to their gender. Girls turn to the gang for protection or to learn survival skills yet are abused both emotionally and physically by male members. The girls' tacit acceptance of such treatment is a testament to the internalization of their marginalized status in society and to the essentially self-destructive nature of much gang activity. Ironically, the gang is an attempt at self-preservation to many, providing protection as well as psychological and financial support; yet it is simultaneously self destructive, contributing to the degradation, injury, and death of its members.

In addition, female gang involvement has important implications beyond the scope of the girls who are themselves gang members. There is an important link between generations as females help perpetuate an inter-generational cycle of gang membership. Many girls who are involved in gangs have children at a young age and raise them without a husband. The overall effect that women have on their children surpasses that of most fathers. It follows, then, that the greater number of girls and women who are involved in gangs, the greater the number of children there will be to become the next generation of gang members.

Although females have traditionally been portrayed as having passive roles within the gang, clearly, the lives of the girls who are currently involved with gangs are far from passive. They take an active role in shaping their identities with the construction of a "chola" front (Vigil, 1988b) and fashion relationships with other girls as well as boys. While far from ideal, decisions concerning their sexual identities and their role within the gang are not ascribed to them, as they have some autonomy in creating a place for themselves. They have more agency and a greater share of power than at any other time in the troubled lives they experience. The role of the individual girl in shaping her identity explains the range in the relationships

that girls have with gangs. Many are the girlfriends and sexual partners of male gang members, as well as being sisters, cousins, and relatives through marriage. While there are still plenty of dysfunctional, volatile and violent aspects to the gang, in the absence of other conventional influences, the gang, howsoever destructive, is the only game in town for impoverished females that are street socialized.

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