

Leisy J. Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders*
(2014)

A collection of stories of Salvadoran transnational families, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* by Leisy J. Abrego, weaves together the diverse experiences of Salvadoran migrants' the United States to paint a picture of the various journeys of families based on a number of factors. In a world of increasing inequality, families in developing nations are searching for a better, more opportune life for their loved ones, so Abrego follows the lives of many different Salvadoran individuals and families to understand all the structural barriers that play into the pursuit of economic stability in the United States. She takes the reader through a journey explaining why families migrate, the actual journey and the settling process, the trauma of family separation, gendered opportunities and expectations, the experience of children, the consequences of long-term family separation, and whether or not the family separation is worth it. While difficult to draw a through line in her analysis of such a diverse array of transnational experiences, and inspired by her family's personal experience, Abrego is less trying to make an argument about immigration policy as she is trying to give a voice to the experiences of families which are so often swept under the rug. In her powerful work *Sacrificing Families*, Leisy Abrego highlights how the constructed nature of illegality has had negative consequences for Salvadoran transnational families within the complicated public discourse, structural barriers, opportunities, and expectations in the United States regarding immigrants (p. xi).

The first chapter provides context for how Salvadoran transnational families operate in terms of gendered expectations, the complex nature of sending of remittances to family back in El Salvador, the production of illegality in the United States, and specific experience of

Salvadorans in the United States. Abrego draws on the importance of the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 and the Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IRIRA) in 1996 and how these acts “set in motion the production of illegality in its current form” (p. 7) and made it more difficult for immigrants to obtain legal permanent residence while also increasing the amount of deportations in making legal permanent residents deportable for a vast expanse of noncriminal offenses (p. 8). Abrego asserts, “Although undocumented status has until recently been largely a matter of civil or administrative law, mainstream media images tend to portray undocumented immigrants as criminals” (p. 8). Regarding gender expectations, “Defined as culturally morally superior to fathers, mothers are morally superior to fathers, mothers are expected to sacrifice themselves in the name of their families” (p. 10). However, mothers tend to remit less than fathers because women typically earn less than men. That being said, remittances “offer a fruitful site for the examination of gendered agency, barriers, and production in transnational families” (p. 11).

Salvadoran parents migrate for a variety of reasons, which Abrego explores in the second chapter. For context, “El Salvador has been deeply stratified, with only a small elite benefitting from the labor of the vast majority of the population living in poverty” (p. 27). As a result, migration and seasonal family separation is a “common strategy of survival” (p. 27). However, violence from civil war has been a major driving factor, forcing too many to flee for their and their families’ safety (p. 27). A weak economy has also been a major driving factor for Salvadorans to flee, while mothers have also felt intense pressure to migrate as responsibility in taking care of their families. For example, “... single mothers like Gloria, who had no one else to rely on for financial assistance, looked to migration. In those moments of desperation, some women began to negotiate and redraw the contours of motherhood to include international

migration as an acceptable path to provide for their families' pressing needs" (p. 33). While families would have loved to stay together in El Salvador the stark realities of home life left no other option but to seek greater prosperity in the United States.

Just as Salvadoran parents migrate for a variety of different reasons, there are also several factors which impact the journeys and settlement of families as well as "how quickly migrant parents can begin to remit to their children and improve their family's wellbeing", and each factor is affected by the U.S. production of migrant illegality (p. 66). The journeys can be treacherous and countless migrants face kidnapping, physical and sexual abuse, experience extortion, lose limbs, and even lose their lives while making the trek through Mexico (p. 66). Illegality, as determined by U.S. immigration policies follows migrants into the United States making it harder for them to find a job and remit quickly to their families (p. 66). On the other hand, migrant parents who are able to afford a visa experience the benefits of legal protection and buying tickets for travel well in advance (p. 66). That being said, "... the stratification created by the U.S. immigration policies extend well beyond U.S. borders to stratify transnational family members in El Salvador as well" (p. 67). The intersections of class and gender, however, disproportionately negative affect women (p. 67). Essentially, the brutal journey and the complete lack of legal protection communicates to migrants that they are "not welcome and not valued as human beings" (p. 67).

Family separation is an extremely traumatic experience, largely due to increasingly tighter immigration laws which "establish the inability of families to migrate together, the potential for physical violence and even death during journeys, the space for total impunity during and after migrant's journeys, and hierarchies that powerfully determine how well or how poorly a family will live" (p. 98). Ever-changing status from Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) to

Temporary Permanent Status (TPS) to illegal and back again takes a huge emotional toll on migrants and their families due to the instability of their protection or complete lack of protection. “Rather than further restricting and criminalizing immigrants, immigration policies should serve to integrate people who are already here” (p. 99). In doing so, we would be able to ensure that migrants would be able to find work, remit to their families, and carry much less of emotional burden.

Further stratification is clearly portrayed through the gendered opportunities, expectations, and well-being as expressed in Chapter 5. “Transnational families act within the context of macroeconomic structures while negotiating and abiding by societal expectations... Immigrant mothers were much more vulnerable to blocked mobility than immigrant fathers, yet they were more reliable remitters” (p. 131). The great distinction between mothers and fathers is that women accept exploitation and domestic violence, seeing it as a necessary sacrifice as a part of motherhood, while fathers, are able to achieve a sense of “self-worth and masculinity” and view are more likely to remit inconsistently (p. 131). That being said, children often suffer more when separated from their mothers, as fathers tend to be more emotionally distant (p. 132).

On the topic of children, their wellbeing is entirely dependent on the circumstances of their transnational family experience. When families are thriving economically, children to fare better emotionally, viewing the separation as worth it. However, “the significant fraction of people who are barely subsisting or who live in extreme distress, the strategy of migration has failed to live up to its initial promise” (p. 158). The sad reality is that parents set out with great intentions to achieve economic prosperity for their families, but the journey is turns out to be much more tumultuous than they anticipate, and they cannot live up to these aims.

What are the consequences of family separation and is it worth it? The children, more than anything, experience tremendous impacts of being in a transnational family. Children struggling financially and emotionally, had trouble developing goals and envision a fuzzy future in the U.S. (p. 181). On the other hand, children thriving financially and at least somewhat successfully coping emotionally were more likely to want to stay in El Salvador to enjoy their higher status (p. 181). The children who were suffering economically felt abandoned and disengaged, more likely to misbehave and less likely to perform well in school (p. 181). But it seems that families who are succeed are few and far between, necessitating a need for bureaucratic change (p. 182). But is it all worth? To separate from your family and risk so much? Here again, the responses greatly varied, depending on the experience, and typically those who fared better economically asserted it was worth it, while the opposite was true for those who did not prosper while separated from their families (p. 183).

While the foundation of this book is qualitative research, filled with stories of transnational Salvadoran families, this structure really did serve the purpose she was going for. As mentioned previously, Abrego did not set out to make a concrete argument about immigration policy, but her goal was to give a voice to the traumatic and tumultuous experiences of Salvadoran families in search of a better life. Throughout the book, she did also include historical facts and relevant numerical statistics which served to validate the families' stories and provide context for how their experiences are reflected in the real world. Additionally, the use of a plethora of Salvadoran families' stories invokes an emotional response from the audience. Coupled with the historical facts and statistics, the emotional stories and experiences work together to make an indirect argument that some policy change needs to happen. If families are

suffering this greatly, then something must be done in order to ensure that Salvadoran and other Latin American families can reasonably obtain legal status.

This book would definitely interest undergraduate or graduate students who have an interest in human rights and/or immigration and public interest law. While this book focuses mainly on the Salvadoran experience in migrating to the United States, understanding the intricate details from why families decide to separate to their ever-changing legal status once they are in the United States is important for those interested in defending human rights, particularly in a country like the United States who claims to protect human rights, yet fails to do so in many different ways. For anyone passionate about amplifying the voices of minority groups and/or protecting vulnerable populations in the United States – this book is for you!