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By PwintPhyu Nandar

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35 Years of Research that Rethinks

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**Sustainable LA
Grand Challenge**

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

GENDER AND EVERYDAY WATER USE IN LOS ANGELES HOUSEHOLDS

This working paper series presents preliminary results from the Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles Study. Conducted by researchers at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women with the support of a Sustainable LA Grand Challenge Grant, this project investigates the important but understudied role of gender—as it intersects with race and class—in residential water use in Los Angeles. The goal of reducing residential water use requires nuanced understanding the ways that people use, think about, and value water. In the context of international development, policymakers and researchers understand that gender shapes water, especially because women and children are disproportionately responsible for procuring water. In the United States, feminist scholars long have found that divisions of labor and decision-making are often gendered. Putting together these two bodies of knowledge, along with the fact that women have led many American water struggles, from Standing Rock to Flint to Compton, it is surprising that gender remains largely absent from water management and water research in the U.S. This study found that women disproportionately are responsible for the household management of water and for its use in households. It connects everyday life to the large-scale questions of water scarcity and management that face our world in the twenty-first century.

Gender and Intergenerational Knowledge in Los Angeles Immigrant Households

by PwintPhyu Nandar

This working paper is adapted from the final report written for Sustainable L.A. Grand Challenges: Undergraduate Research Scholars Program in Spring 2018. When I started my research with the Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles project, I wanted to further explore how race, class, gender, and water all intersected. As this turned out to be more complex than I had originally thought, I was quickly drawn to learning more about how immigration and water use were related.

Water is a medium through which we can learn more about people's everyday lives. Taken for granted by most people in the United States, water is considered a scarce resource in sunny Los Angeles. How people regard water (whether as an always-available commodity or as a finite resource) affects how they use water. The Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles project asks what influences how people think about water and what role gender

plays. My specific research within the project aims to better understand how immigrant households in Los Angeles use water. This paper recounts my findings, starting with historical context. Then, I explore the everyday lives of the members of seven households and how they interact with water. I also analyze how each household's immigration experiences influence the ways they use, conserve, and value water. Understanding household water use is important in informing policy regarding water conservation. It is even more crucial to ensure that those policies are inclusive of the different communities living in Los Angeles. Immigrant households offer valuable insight on water conservation practices, and it is time to include their knowledge in water conservation policies.

History

In Los Angeles, where this study takes place, divisions of race, class, and immigration status are evident in the city's history of water. As a scarce resource, wa-

ter is not equally distributed between Los Angeles's diverse communities. Since the transition towards modern water infrastructure began in the nineteenth century, water usage and distribution have been associated with class, race and immigration status. Historically, lower-income Mexican-Californian and Chinese communities in L.A. did not have access to sewage disposal while richer (and whiter) communities did (Torress-Rouff 2006). There was also a distinct difference between Mexican-Californian ideologies and European American ideologies regarding water access for households. Mexican-Californians in Los Angeles were used to *zanjas*, an open water system which granted households access and distribution rights in a communal water supply (Torress-Rouff 2006). European Americans, however, implemented piped systems of water transportation, which meant closed access to water, allowing a select few to determine the water rights for the larger community (Torress-Rouff 2006). The transition from *zanjas* to piped water led to unequal access to waterways as Mexican-Californians began to lose their power over water distribution and access.

As time went on, the usage of water continued to differ between the upper-class and working-class. This class division was (and still is) racialized and tied to immigration status. Los Angeles's upper-class consisted mostly of white Americans, while the working-class were made up disproportionately of people of color and immigrants. During pre-World War II Los Angeles, working class suburbs took advantage of the lack of housing regulation by growing fruit, vegetables, and livestock on their properties (Nicolaidis 1999). These communities used household water as a source of profit, as a means of feeding family members, and as a way to barter with neighbors. In contrast, upper-class households used their water to maintain gardens and lawns for aesthetic purposes and as status symbols (Nicolaidis 1999). Whereas water was used to represent access to luxury within the upper class, working class households used their water as creative means of saving money.

Today, lawn culture has taken over the United States and Los Angeles is no exception. Pristine lawns are ubiquitous within Beverly Hills, one of four neighborhoods included in this study. Perfectly green lawns are seen as a sign of neighborliness, good morals,



The Beverly Hills neighborhood in Los Angeles

and wealth (Weigert 1994). After all, a great deal of money goes into maintaining a perfect lawn. Under this idyllic image of a perfect neighborhood lies a sinister issue: the maintenance of such lawns requires almost-daily watering and poses a threat to water conservation. With water being available in limited quantities, this upkeep is a serious barrier to saving water in Los Angeles.

This fact does not go unnoticed by other neighborhoods of Los Angeles. During a home visit with the research team, Valeria Flores¹ complains that rich people of Beverly Hills can use as much water as they'd like, but the less fortunate are the ones being told to save water. Valeria is the mother of a very lively household, with two kids running around and a husband always working. One of the thirty-six households studied in this research project, Valeria and her two daughters had much insight to share with us.

Flores: The River

Valeria Flores is an open person, unafraid to speak her mind. Her two young daughters, Valeria Castillo² and Ana Castillo, are also very friendly. During the second home visit, when the interview takes place, they bring gifts to the interviewers and draw pictures for them. When asked what growing up was like for her, Valeria tells us about the river in her childhood backyard. By the river, she says, there were many mango trees, their fruit ripe and ready for picking. While she describes her childhood in El Salvador, her older daughter—also named Valeria—exclaims,

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of study participants.

2. Valeria Flores' oldest daughter is named after her. All references to 'Valeria' refer to Flores, unless specified.

“Yes, yes, you told us many times.”

Valeria is unfazed by her daughter’s interruption and continues to describe the importance of the river to her and her family. From generation to generation, women used water from the river and washed clothes in the river. As Valeria talks about her past, she begins to realize that it was women who were the ones using most of the water and that this practice was due to the number of household chores they managed. Her grandmother, her mother, and now Valeria herself used most of the water. Whether from the river or tap, from El Salvador or the United States, the women in her family were always in charge of the household and in turn, in charge of the water. Even though there is no longer a river running behind her house, Valeria’s use of water reflects that of her grandmother and her mother before her.

Now the main sources of water for Valeria, in her current Koreatown home, are the tap and the water jugs that she buys. Valeria tells us that she is still conscious of water here in the U.S. and is trying to save as much as possible. This is something not all Los Angeles neighborhoods do, Valeria adds, complaining about richer neighborhoods being water guzzlers compared to her own household where they use as little water as possible.

With two daughters of her own, Valeria is trying to pass on her knowledge and value of water to them. She says that she is constantly telling them that there is no water in California, so they must save water. She also leads by example: she doesn’t let the water run too long and doesn’t use excess water when bathing her two daughters. Valeria is invested in ensuring that her water conservation practices carry on to the next generation.

Valeria’s family shows a great example of a maternal link in regard to passing down knowledge of water. In low-income countries, women are disproportionately responsible for household water management, to the point where they are unable to attend school regularly or pursue a career of their choice (WHO and UNICEF 2017). In El Salvador, where Valeria is from, we can clearly see this delegation of responsibility. Despite immigrating to the United States, Valeria still holds on to her role of water management and education, albeit in a different context. She passes on her knowledge of water to her young children, actively tells them to save water, and shares stories from her country



of origin.

Chen: Of Mothers and Memories

Following a similar maternal thread, Rachel Chen shares what she remembers about water growing up. Currently, she lives with her partner in a Koreatown apartment. Born in China, Chen moved to Maryland when she was nine before settling in Los Angeles. Rachel’s mother is a water resource engineer, which informs Rachel’s unique relationship to water. Her grandmother was also water conscious. Rachel remembers both her grandmother and her mother practicing various water conservation techniques. Her grandmother would put a bucket under the shower to conserve water, while her mother reused the water from rinsing fruit to water plants. Rachel would conserve water alongside her mother and grandmother. After they moved to Maryland, Rachel no longer continued these practices, although her mother and grandmother would continue to do so and monitor their water usage.

Although Rachel herself does not continue these familial water conservation practices, they are still preserved in her memory. She is able to share the ways her mother and grandmother conserved water. This is valuable information that could be shared with others who want to conserve water but do not know where to start. Often in California, people are told to take shorter showers to save water. Instead of a single approach to water conservation, it could be more beneficial for people to learn various ways to save water.

Sanchez: Dad, the Water Warrior

The previous two families have prominent mother figures. This remains true for the Sanchez family. They are a family of four, with a stay-at-home mom, a consultant dad, and two children. The father, Cesar, attributes the value he places on water to the influence of his grandmothers and aunts. The two children stay patiently by their parents' sides as the interview begins. When the interviewers ask about Cesar's childhood, he jokingly replies, "You ready? Because my whole narrative is about water, so how much time do you have?"

Cesar begins by telling us about how he grew up going to a river by his hometown every week. As a result, he grew to appreciate water. Because water was not easily obtained, he began to understand its value at an early age. During his teenage years in Colombia, his maternal grandmother taught him how to appreciate water even more. In addition to his grandmother, Cesar was also raised by many aunts. He took quick showers in Colombia due to a lack of water heater. His grandmothers and his aunts also told him about their experiences of water. They washed their clothes in the river and had been doing this for many generations. They also had "an aboveground tank system" used for capturing and storing water. The water from the tank was used as an emergency supply for drinking and cooking when the town had run out of municipality-provided water. Cesar's grandmother frequently told him how much she appreciated water and how this appreciation was passed through her family tree. From these experiences in Colombia, he developed his love and respect for water. He also connects his awareness of water scarcity to his appreciation of water.

Now, in his mid forties, Cesar and his wife, Kathryn Salazar Sanchez, impart this appreciation of water to their kids, ensuring that this appreciation continues to pass through their family tree. As a stay-at-home mom, Kathryn teaches small lessons on water conservation to her children: to not flush after every toilet use, to turn off the tap when brushing their teeth, and to not be wasteful with water. The couple admits that their efforts are imperfect: "Kids are still kids, after all." They tell the interviewers that there are times when the children want to use more water than is needed, especially for playing.

Both Kathryn and Cesar are water conscious and

actively teach their kids the value of water. Kathryn even considered having a water birth due to the couple's belief that water was sacred. What sets this family apart from other households is that Cesar's connection to water is much stronger than that of Kathryn. In the examples of the Chen and Flores households, women are the ones carrying and passing down the knowledge of water to other women. In the Sanchez household, Kathryn had little to say about her childhood and did not mention any maternal influences on her ideologies towards water. Cesar stands out as both an exception and part of the overall pattern. Cesar was one of few male participants in this project who credit the women in his life as the main influences on his conception of water. At the same time, Cesar contributes to the pattern of women holding responsibility for passing on knowledge of water conservation and how to value water. This pattern is a recurring theme in this project and will be seen in interviews to come.

Zambrano: Childhood Influences

Kimberly Zambrano's story follows this established pattern, but with nuances. Born in Ecuador, she immigrated to Santa Clarita at the age of thirteen and attended college and graduate school in the Bay Area, and then finally moved back to the Los Angeles area in 2013. She now lives with her partner. When asked if she thought about water use growing up, Kimberly is quick to bring up her mother. She says, that her mother is "...the type to want to save water in every sense possible." Kimberly goes on to tell us that her mother's water saving habits continue today and have largely influenced her own water conservation techniques as well. However, it is more difficult for Kimberly to pinpoint the exact reason why she and her mother were keen to save water.

Kimberly knows that one of the reasons she continues to conserve water is because saving water is better for the environment and is especially important in California when there is a drought. She cannot remember whether the environment is one of the reasons that her mom told her to save water. Rather, she recalls her family having to pay water bills in her Santa Clarita home after they immigrated. Her mother told her that saving water would also save them money. Even before Kimberly starts telling her story, she told us that she believed she was raised to save water for various reasons. She speculates

that it could be her Ecuadorian culture or being low-income.

Kimberly's narrative demonstrates the motive behind water conservation can be unclear. While saving water is ingrained into her daily habits, she is unable to give a singular reason for doing so. Additionally, Kimberly does not talk about her childhood in Ecuador as much as other participants talk about their lives before they immigrated. Still, Kimberly is able to recall her childhood and how it affected her water use growing up. It is easy to paint broad strokes about how immigrants are naturally good at water conservation because of how they had to save water in their country of origin. Kimberly shows that this is not the case, as culture and class both play a role in affecting household water use.

Martinez: Some Things Do Change

The Martinez household also differs from the usual immigrant narrative of bringing water conservation practices with them to the United States. Maria Martinez, the mother, was born in Tijuana, Mexico. Her daughter, Estela Martinez, was born in the United States. If you were to infer what their dynamic was from reading about the households above, you might assume Maria continues to save water in the United States and her daughter follows in her footsteps most of the time. Judging from the title of this section, you may also assume there are some possible generational differences between the mom and daughter. This is not entirely true. Instead, the Martinez household offers a great example of differences that exist within immigrant households, while fitting a general pattern.

Maria and Estela are an energetic mother-daughter duo. They interact freely with each other as the interview progresses; Estela often asking her mother questions or to elaborate in between interview questions and answers. Maria does not shy away and will indulge in her daughter's questions, making their dynamic warm and friendly.

Maria is indeed water conscious and values water, however she tells us how she uses more water in the United States than she did in Mexico to clean. She still finds ways to save water, even though she cleans every day. For example, she uses water for cleaning as she showers. She also likes to take short baths. Maria tells us she had to pay for water when

she first immigrated here and, as a result, became more conscious of her water use. A big difference for Maria is her use of bottled water here. Growing up in Mexico, she could not afford bottled water. Now, in her MacArthur Park home, bottled water is the main source of drinking water. Both Maria and Estela say they prefer bottled water, because they do not like the taste of tap water. They even provide bottled water for their dog!

When Maria describes her childhood experiences in Mexico, Estela asks her mom in shock, "Did you guys have toilets?" Her mother tells her they did. In her defense, Estela says, "I've never been to Mexico! Ever! All I know about Mexico is rags and dirt, pot things for toilets and the river for shower." Maria simply calmly explains to Estela that this is not the case.

Estela, American-born, is a few weeks away from being a junior in high school. Her favorite bottled water brand is Fiji Water, which her mother previously said they could not afford. Estela also takes Chinese at the local community college, because her mother has insisted that knowing multiple languages would be helpful for her career. It is obvious how much Maria and Estela care for each other. That said, Estela is very different from Maria. She does not conserve water, nor does she care about water as much as her mom. For example, she takes an hour-long bath, refilling the water several times. According to Estela herself, the only way she conserves water is by trying to water the plants with the dog's old drinking water when she throws it out the window. She is aware that she uses much more water than her mother, and both acknowledge this fact.

There is a stark difference between Maria and Estela. While multiple factors may account for this difference, it is unclear which is ultimately the cause. Perhaps it is because Estela was born in the United States where there was no immediate need to save water. As such, with a lack of water conservation practices developing early in her life, water conservation may not seem standard to Estela. The difference may also be generational: in addition to the geographical disparity between Maria and Estela's birthplaces, Estela was born at a time when water conservation was not seen as a necessity. Lastly, it could be that Estela is in a stage of her life where water conservation is not a priority. Whatever the reason



A rooftop garden maintained by one of the study's participants

may be, this household demonstrates the difficulty of passing water conservation knowledge on to the next generation. While Maria may have had to conserve water, either for scarcity or monetary reasons, Estela does not feel the same pressures Maria did when she grew up in Mexico. It is easy to assume practices of water usage will continue from generation to generation, but this household is a prime example of how the passage can be broken.

Garcia: Water Scarcity and Abundance

The Garcia household further illustrates the connection between scarcity, conservation, and appreciation hinted at by the mother-daughter differences in the Martinez household. In the Garcia household, mother Rita grew up in an area of scarcity in Mexico while her husband Alejandro lived next to a river in a rural area in El Salvador, rarely experiencing water scarcity. Both of their children were born in the United States. As Rita had experienced water scarcity and Alejandro did not, it is easy to compare and contrast between the two of them.

For Rita, water was only accessible in certain places and times in her small town. Every morning, her family would get water from a well. Her parents told her to be careful with this water, because it was a hassle to go out and retrieve it. Rita recalls drinking “turtle water,” a term she used to describe the source of drinking water, named for where turtles drink. She laughs when she tells us about this part of her childhood. To her, it is such a contrast to her current

life, where she cares more about water quality and buys water. When she was living in Mexico, she says, she was not even aware of the concept of water. She considers having access to tap water in the home a luxury. Even with all the differences between Mexico and the United States, she still wants to prevent water waste, despite not having to pay for water as she lives in the apartment.

Rita’s husband has a different narrative regarding his water conservation journey. In El Salvador, he lived by a river and was not as concerned about saving water, since water was easily accessible. In the United States, Alejandro worked as a gardener in different cities and neighborhoods. Due to his work experiences, he gained more knowledge about water use and became more aware of how water conservation differs from place to place.

While both husband and wife have different experiences when it comes to learning to conserve water, they both strive to teach their children to value water and to take care of it. Alejandro’s work experiences motivate him to instill this knowledge to his children, whereas his wife is motivated by her experiences growing up. Similar to the Sanchez family, they confess that the children have to learn about saving water, as they otherwise do not think about water much. Rita tells her oldest son not to leave the water running and she tells all of her children to save water by turning off the faucet. As for her youngest daughter, Rita limits her opportunities to play with water.

The Garcia family’s story echoes the issues regarding generational transfer of water conservation practices as seen in previous families’ stories. Across multiple families, the generational transfer of knowledge seems difficult, and children are not automatically instilled with knowledge to value and save water. Furthermore, the differences between Rita and Alejandro showcase the importance of scarcity and childhood influence. Experiencing water scarcity is a factor leading to better retention of water conservation practices. At the same time, experiences in adulthood can influence and even change one’s perspectives on water. This household is a great example of how different experiences can lead to the similar ideologies of water conservation. Additionally, the Garcia family are part of a pattern highlighting the difficulties of teaching children water conservation practices.

Park: Persistent Practices

The final family that I will discuss is the Park family. They exemplify many different themes pertaining to household water conservation across immigrant families. As a multigenerational family, the Parks showcase different experiences of water practices across different generations and different experiences. Youngja Park is from South Korea. Everyone else in the Park family is from the United States. Her daughter, Jenny, and her son-in-law, Jaehyun, all live together with her grandson, Ethan. They are also multilingual, with Youngja speaking in Korean, but able to understand English.

Youngja oversees the water use in their household and as a result, she also uses water the most. She is also in charge of laundry, watering plants, and cooking, alongside her daughter. Youngja also uses water conservation practices learned in Korea in her current Koreatown home. For example, she uses leftover water from washing vegetables to water the garden. Additionally, she uses rainwater from the family's rain barrel to water the front lawn. Youngja considers it wasteful to not recycle water. When asked about her time in South Korea, Youngja tells us there was not a need to conserve water. Her daughter, however, explains that Youngja *did* experience a period of water scarcity due to the Korean War. While the water by her house was not directly impacted, water quality became a great concern. This led to the formation of Youngja's water conservation practices, which she carries on to this day.

Jenny and Jaehyun do not follow Youngja's water conservation practices, although it is unclear why. Meanwhile, Ethan is currently learning to save water from his school. When discussing whether Ethan saves water in the house, Jaehyun laughs. Ethan has been learning water conservation practices from school and has been teaching his parents in turn.

As mentioned before, the Park family exemplifies common themes found in immigrant households' water conservation practices. In addition, Youngja exudes a strong matriarchal presence. We also see how Youngja's conservation practices may have originated from the scarcity that she endured during the Korean War. Finally, the Park family demonstrates how children can, in turn, teach their elders.

Conclusion

This study has found that immigrant households have a plethora of water conservation practices drawn from unique experiences and knowledge of water conservation developed in their countries of origin. Some individuals have experienced water scarcity and lack of access to water in their countries of origin. As such, these experiences shape how they conserve water in Los Angeles. Additionally, we found that women facilitate the process of passing down knowledge of water conservation in the United States and in countries of origin.

Children of immigrants born in the United States, however, do not always continue the practice of water conservation as they believe there is not a need to conserve water. Some immigrants themselves also cease to use water conservation practices in the United States as they gain better access to water here. While practices may not continue to be in use, the knowledge of water conservation still remains within the household.

Our immigrant households have much to teach us about household water use and conservation. Investigating these seven households uncovers common themes: mothers' responsibility for water management and passing down knowledge, the influence of scarcity and poverty (or lack thereof) on water use, and generational differences between parents and children. These themes reveal that the reasons why people use household water the way they do are complex, yet integral to understanding household water conservation.

Los Angeles is no stranger to a dry climate, but as climate change progresses and temperatures rise, the need to conserve water becomes more and more urgent. In addition to looking to water experts for further insight on water conservation, this study asserts Los Angeles immigrant households as experts in their own right.

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