UNIVERSITY OF STOCKHOLM

Sociology Department

“QUEENS’ LOVE ALWAYS AND FOREVER- AMOR DE REINA” – LATINAS WHO CHOSE TO JOIN THE ALMIGHTY LATIN KING AND QUEEN NATION

BY Camila Salazar Atías

Final Paper in Sociology, C-level

Spring semester 2003

Supervisor Elena Dingu-Kyrklund
Abstract

The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, one of New York’s largest street gangs allowed me through the Street Organization Project to interview and conduct field research with their female members during the years of 1997-1999. This paper is a direct result of my research and it examines the processes leading Latinas to join the female branch of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, show the changing nature of gang female participation and the motives for continuing within the gang.

The New York State Latin Queens were founded in 1991 after a manifesto for the Latin Queens was penned by King Blood, the First President of the New York State Latin Kings. Until that time, there had been no organized group for women who wanted to join the Latin Kings. They were called the Naia Tribe. After 1996, the role of the Queens began to expand with the ascension of King Tone to the Inca position (First President) of the New York State. Under King Tone’s leadership, the rules of the Queens were amended. For the first time the Queens began to put forward their own demands, which challenged some of the discriminatory rules and male privileges of the group.

The Latin Queens I interviewed were from different areas in New York with a predominantly Puerto Rican and Dominican background. The respondents described their motives for joining either directly or indirectly under a multitude of different themes that spoke to the effects of systematic physical abuse, economic deprivation, health problems, emotional trauma, cultural denial and family disintegration. I will analyze these in greater depth by breaking them down and contrasting the findings to the four themes also identified in the literature as: issues of identity, family pressures, economic survival and family/community networks.
Index

1. Introduction page 4
2. The aim and approach page 6-7
3. Methodology page 7-13
4. State of the Art. Background page 10-14
   4.1. From Invisibility to Agency and Pathology: The Pushes and Pulls of Gang Female Membership.
   4.2. Why do girls join gangs? - A theoretical approach
      4.2.1. Issues of Identity
      4.2.2. Family Pressures
      4.2.3. Economic Survival
      4.2.4. Family and Community Networks
5. Background presentation of the Latin Queens page 14-15
6. Interviews- Characteristics of the Sample page 15-17
7. Motives for Joining and the Provision of Needs page 17-31
   7.1. Individual and group identity within the group
   7.2. Family Pressures and the relieving role of the group
      7.2.1. In search of Security, Safety and Support
      7.2.2. An alternative to Rejection and Abandonment
      7.2.3. Seeking Independence
      7.2.4. The Surrogate Family
      7.2.5. The Complementary Family
   7.3. Economic Survival and the supporting role of the group
   7.4. Community/Family Networks – the importance of kinship connections
8. Conclusion. The role of the gang as an anti-discriminatory tool page 32
9. Bibliography page 33
10. Appendix page 36
   1.1. The flow of and the effects of the monetary award on the interviews.
   1.2. Short on the female members quoted in the paper
1. Introduction

Gangs are becoming a global concern that can be observed in almost every modern society. There are different kinds of gangs: street gangs, prison gangs, motorcycle gangs as well as gangs that belong to one specific ethnic group, color or neighborhood. People who join gangs are searching for something that society is not offering or that is not available to them with normal means, these can be power, money, identity, or security. Sometimes, the sense of belonging and not being alienated from society is what brings and keep them together. Thus gangs more and more frequently appear in areas with high level of segregation. Not only classical economical and class segregation, but also cultural and ethnic segregation occur, all phenomena that are increasingly becoming a problem today.

The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (aka A.L.K.Q.N) is composed of members with a Latin ethnic background. Their female branch The Latin Queens of this once most notorious street/prison gang in New York form a small part of the gang. Leaders within the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation argue that the group is an organization, not a gang, that functions much like an extended family by building Latino pride and empowering their members. The Latin Queens\(^1\) struggle to build up their self-esteem, by uplifting themselves, by finding pride through their cultural identity, and by being a part of a family where they can find support, love, respect, pride, loyalty and honesty. Trying to escape from a society where they are ‘invisible’ and deprived of their basic human needs, and where they inherently are predestined to fail just by being women, Latinas, and poor. Unfortunately, their task is far from uncomplicated and very paradoxical. This paper is an attempt to describe the inner processes that lead to female gang formation and the way they function as an empowering social structure.

\(^1\) The members of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation are called Kings/ Queens. They use Queen or King in the same manner as we use titles such as Dr or Mrs.
Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation

Almighty father King of Queens

We the Latin Queens of this Almighty Nation come with our heart open to
Receive the wisdom, obedience and love that this Nation requires

Give us the great strength to follow and understand everything this Nation expects from us

We as Queens promise to never let this Nation be stopped

From the reproduction of Kings and Queens

We are also willing to stand by our Kings to the end

We promise to never betray our Kings

And to teach our future king and Queens everything that this Nation demands.

We also understand that every King and Queen of this Nation is our brother and sister

And we will be there every time that we are needed

Our Queens’ love always and forever – Amor de Reina!

(The Latin Queens’ oath they live by from the Almighty Latin Queen’s manifesto)
2. The aim and approach

The aim of my sociological research was to provide a description of the processes leading Latinas to female gang formation and their motives for continuing within the gang. During the years 1997-1999 I worked with the Street Organization Project at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. We carried out an ethnographic study of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (A.L.K.Q.N.) in New York, which included a sub-study of the female members and their role in the transformation of the group; from a gang into a “street organization” (Brotherton and Barrios 2003). During these years the A.L.K.Q.N. was in the midst of an extraordinary transition (Brotherton 1999), setting themselves apart from the city's other gangs by publicly renouncing violence and crime (Latina Magazine 1998). Once labeled by New York City’s media (Newsday 1995) one of the most "ferocious street gangs" ever to have prowled the city. There were signs that the Nation\(^2\) was striving to be a group that no longer existed outside of the law.\(^3\) Based on the interviews with female members and my ethnographic observations of the group’s formal and informal practices over time, I will now attempt to provide an analysis of: (i) the self-reported motives behind membership in the Latin Queens, and (ii) the multiple ways that the Latin Queens meet their members’ needs and aspirations.

Camila: What are the main goals of the organization?

Queen H: To show our people that we don't have to take what society says that we have to. We don't have to be second-class citizens in America, you know, that we can achieve the American dream. You know, we don't have to say, "Oh, well, they're arresting such and such number of Hispanics every day." No. We say, "Why are they arresting that many? What's going on in the community that they've chosen this way of life that gets them arrested?" ...In the community that we come from everyone's searching for hope, everyone's searching for a way to make a difference and when it comes down to the Kings and Queens they see that opportunity to make a difference

\(^2\) The Nation is short for The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation. The members often use this abbreviation.

\(^3\) "a group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced" (Brotherton and Barrios, 2003:15).
Camila: What kind of difficulties has your organization had in reaching those goals?

Queen H: Oh, my God...they always say we're the gang. They never give us an opportunity because we're a gang. And a gang, a gang, a gang, we're into criminal activities. I'm not a gang member. I'm in an organization. I will not put my kids into a gang, cuz I got raised right. How am I gonna put my kids into a gang? So that's the main problem we always have, “we're a gang,” “we're killers,” “we're murderers,” we're this, we're that. I'm not a murderer. I'm not a killer. I'm a mother with two kids and I'm tryin’ to raise my kids right and tryin’ to help others so when time comes and I die I know that I did the best thing I could as a human being.

3. Methodology

The research literature is very explicit about the problems of gaining access to gang females who are considered a “hard-to-reach” population (Morgan 1996). Among the challenges researchers have typically confronted are: respondents who are guarded toward outsiders, finding a trusted informant, and myriad of external and internal developments that can negatively impact on the research climate, e.g. police harassment campaigns, arrests and imprisonment of key members, threats from other groups, high turnovers in leadership personnel, and sensationalistic media stories (Hagedorn 1998). To counter these difficulties, the research team that I was working with developed a collaborative relationship with the A.L.K.Q.N under the aegis of the Street Organization Project, in which we agreed on: (i) the details of the research design, i.e., life history interviews with a cross-section of the membership over three years and field observations of meetings, social gatherings and political events, (ii) compensation for interviews ($25.00 was paid for each interview into the group’s general fund), (iii) the confidentiality of all data and the anonymity of all subjects, (iv) the payment of a consultation fee to anyone who functioned as a project liaison and recruiter of respondents, and (v) the mode of publication of the data, i.e., that journal articles and a book on the reform history of the A.L.K.Q.N would appear. As part of this research relationship, the Street Organization project negotiated with the leadership of both the Kings and Queens to carry out a sub study of the Latin Queens.
With this agreement in hand, formal access to the membership was not a major impediment and the leadership of the A.L.K.Q.N used general meetings to explain to the members that we, the researchers, were looking for subjects to interview and that such interviews were endorsed by the group. In time, a number of women came forward and through different liaisons in the Queens, a selective sample of female members offered to be part of the study. In the first year of the project, before I was a part of it, two female interviewers carried out thirteen life history interviews primarily at large meetings of the entire group. These interviews yielded a great deal of descriptive data but it was clear that a lot of background information was missing and that the respondents were not being as self-reflective as they could. Over the next two years when I joined the project the approach was changed and we decided that I would carry out the interviews. The greater part of them would take place in the respondent’s neighborhoods, the most poverty stricken areas in New York City. During this period (1997-1999) I visited members’ homes and attended both formal and informal meetings of the group. In the beginning, the subjects were reluctant to answer questions or answered in a rehearsed manner believing that I was working undercover. But as time went by their trust grew and facilitated the interviews. This paper is a result from the fieldwork and interviews that took place during that period.

Field notes East New York, Brooklyn, November 1997

Queen F. picked me up at Van Siclen's train station. After a short walk through the neighborhood where there were groups of young people standing in every corner we reached her apartment in the projects. When we walked in the building a loud sound rang, she giggles "just like in prison?" The corridor leading to her door is dark and long. Queen F. is a single mother, living with her grandmother. The apartment is in desperate need of repair. There are big holes in the walls and the paint is flaking off... Her boyfriend walks in and asks me how I'm going home? When he finds out I'm taking the train back he looks very concerned, and continues to ask me if I know where I am? The area, he tells me, is very dangerous and I should not be here alone, there are Bloods everywhere. Queen F. and her King walk me to the train. I'm scared. Is it

---

4 I contacted the Street Organization project when I was studying for my bachelor degree in deviant behavior and social control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I had a year left was interested in their research thus applied as their research assistant. As I am Latina, know how to speak Spanish and English fluently I had a better chance to get close to the girls.

5 Bloods are one of the biggest gangs in the United States. They are mainly situated in the west coast but had recently start growing in the east coast. They were rivals with the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation.
better to walk with the Bloods rivals or alone? I ask them. They tell me that as they are from the neighborhood, we should be okay.

Field notes from Charas Community Center, October 1997

Today when I arrived at 11am, only a few Queens had arrived. They walked by me, glanced at me, and continued walking. I know they recognized me. They were dressed up today, because they were having a baby shower for Queen C., one of the leaders who also is King Blood’s (the founder of the New York chapter) daughter through the Nation hence inherently very powerful. I brought her a gift. Suddenly seven Queens arrived at the same time. They were carrying sodas, popcorn, a cake, and a music system: all the ingredients for a party. The Queens that were already there seemed to be upset because they were late, Queen C. should be arriving in any moment now. I'm still standing outside the building. The Queens that know who I am have arrived but choose to ignore me. I feel excluded, a bit dumb with my gift and all. Last week they invited me over. I feel like an intruder.

Through a lot of hard work and much patience, a mutually trusting relationship was developed with a range of key female informants. These contacts and interactions yielded a further 15 interviews, with three members being interviewed on repeated occasions for follow-up information and clarification purposes.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that roughly took two hours to complete. The guide focused on identity formation, experiences with the U.S. education system, family history, motives for joining the group, political consciousness, group relations with mainstream society, internal group dynamics. Criminal and work histories, drug experiences, and both individual and group aspirations. The interviews were all recorded on tape and later transcribed. Total confidentiality was promised to the subjects, and when the interview was completed each interviewee was asked to sign a slip with their Queen name for which they in exchange received $25 for their knowledge and expertise. The same interview guide was employed in all interviews, even though the length and focus of the interviews could differ dramatically. I used an inductive method to analyze and process the data (Cressey 1959) into two emergent themes: motives and group provisions, and the extended case study approach (Burowoay 1991, 2000) to contrast our findings with existent theories and explanations of gang female involvement.
4. State of the Art. Background

4.1. From Invisibility to Agency and Pathology: The Pushes and Pulls of Gang Female Membership

Research on group behavior amongst adolescent inner city youth for most of the last century has: (i) mainly been concerned with questions of male criminality, (ii) been written mostly by male criminologists, and (iii) generally been resistant to discussions on the role of gender either in the commission of deviance or in its representation (Chesney-Lind 1997). This tendency toward female exclusion at the conceptual, empirical and analytical levels has been particularly pronounced in studies of gangs. In a recent literature review by two prominent researchers, the authors concluded:

"Much of the research on gangs has ignored females or trivialized female gangs. Influential early studies of gangs, which for years shaped the research agenda, concentrated almost exclusively on males. The implicit message of these studies was that female gangs were unimportant" (Moore and Hagedorn 2001).6

While it is evident that the role of gender in general and that of females in particular have long been neglected, obscured or miscast in gang research, more recently, starting with two pioneering studies by Quicker (1983) and Campbell (1984), a number of works have appeared that contest the terrain. In this newer literature, influenced by feminist critiques of the discourse, gang females are viewed: (i) as multi-dimensional, (ii) in an interactional relationship with gender, race, and class structures, and (iii) as purposive social agents (Harris 1988, Moore 1991, Lauderback et al. 1992, Fishman 1995, Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995, Brotherton 1996, Miller 2001, Nurge 2001). Thus, the days when the “gendered habits” (Chesney-Lind and Joe 1995) of white, middle-class, male researchers could represent gang females as little more than “bad girl” caricatures (e.g. tom boys, sex objects, vamps etc.) when perceived as “active” or as appendages of male gangs when perceived as “passive” (Campbell 1984) are, for the most part, behind us.

Nonetheless, while gang females have certainly merited and begun to receive much more studied attention as subjects-in-themselves, their treatment within criminology has not been without its tensions. Curry (1998) has found that most of the recent gang female research has been conducted within one of two conceptual tropes: the “liberation hypothesis,” whose

---

6 Among the reasons cited in the literature behind this male-centrism are: the male-dominance and -positionality of social scientists (Harding 1987), the mutually reinforcing effects of “cognitive purification” and urban male stereotyping (Moore 1991), and the tautological reasoning that since males do most of the crime they should receive most of the attention (as if males emerged from a gendered vacuum).
adherents argue that there is a new, independent gang female who is as criminally deviant as her male counterpart (Taylor 1991), and the “social injury hypothesis” which “holds that any benefit in personal liberation that girls may gain from gang involvement is outweighed by the social costs of such affiliation” (Curry 1998:128). As hypotheses in and of themselves both represent a correction to earlier stereotypes by helping to locate gang females as active players in the urban drama of social and economic dislocation brought about by de-industrializing capitalism. However, when each construct is used to describe a pure, ideal type (Weber 1946) of offender/victim the resulting analyses tend to simplify and pathologize the subject as context, agency and history are all sacrificed for the sake of proclaiming the novelty of the discovery (Chesney-Lind and Joe 1995, Miller 2001).

Despite these theoretical/empirical shortcomings, our knowledge of gang females has increased considerably, particularly in the factors behind their emergence and regeneration. It is my aim in this paper to advance our understanding a little more and look at the variations in this process by showing the changing nature of gang female participation.

4.2 Why do girls join gangs?

As mentioned above, one of the most important contributions of the recent research into gang females has been the depth of the debate surrounding the conditions influencing the mutual and reciprocal relationship between girls and gangs. In the parlance of mainstream criminology this is sometimes referred to as push/pull factors of gang membership (Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

To summarize from the literature, I might describe the “push” factors that influence females to join gangs as a combination of the socio-economic, political, psychological and cultural determinants that structure and constitute the daily lives of inner-city females such that the membership of gangs is a viable option among their life choices. This rather broad, all encompassing appreciation of the macro and micro ecological context in which a gang female orientation is developed is in contrast to the narrow, highly functionalist conception of “pull” factors that is omnipresent in much of the research, particularly on males, an example of which is the following:

“The neighborhood gangs provides both instrumental and social benefits to its members. The instrumental advantages include ...money from drug sales, robbery, or property crime, as well as protection...The social benefits ...include power, prestige,
or thrills associated with gang membership. In addition, the gang provides a place to “hang out” with friends, something to do.” (Decker and Van Winkle 1996:27)

Integrating and delineating these “push/pull” factors into conceptual themes, I have arrived at four interrelated though distinct areas, which were prominent in the literature: (i) issues of identity, (ii) family pressures, (iii) economic survival and (iv) community networks.

4.2.1. Issues of identity:

Two critical factors influencing females’ pathways into gangs are the twin issues of gender and ethnic identity. In Campbell’s early work from 1984 she found that females who joined gangs were engaged in a struggling to resolve the nature of their femininity that could be traced to the prescribed womanhood practiced by their mothers. She argues that females moving toward gang life were rejecting such traditional female traits as stoicism, passivity and loyalty, all of which are key tenets of the culture of Marianismo, and embraced the idealized values of the assimilated American woman, independence, the freedom to consume and the notion of the suburban middle-class family. This struggle to construct a female self, i.e., one that is willed by the individual rather than culturally conditioned and socially reproduced, is also present to some degree in numerous other studies across a range of ethnicities (Fishman 1995, Hunt et al 2000, Nurge 2001).

It is not surprising that certain females gravitate toward gangs since the females in such organizations send powerful signals of togetherness and collective empowerment to outsiders. Like the males, they may refer to themselves as “homies” (Quick 1983) and they are pledged always to be there for their affiliates. This demonstration of basic street solidarity is not just prevalent in fighting situations but also extends to economic, emotional and moral support, especially in contemporary times when many of the neighborhood men have been taken out of circulation (Campbell 1984, Brotherton 1996, Joe and Chesney-Lind 1996, Curtis 1999).

7 However, based on the more recent literature on gang females (and males), I might conclude that the instrumental aspect of gang membership has been more associated with male gang members and that females are more drawn by a gang’s “social benefits.”

8 Marianismo and Machismo offer rigid definitions for gender roles that are often complimentary. In their extreme, they demand for passive women and domineering men.

9 Homies is short for home boy/girl, which refers to someone who lives or come from ones neighborhood, linked to ones home. Can also be used as a nickname for a person who is affiliated to a certain group/gang.
Similarly, gang females who are mostly minorities have been found to strongly identify with their own ethnic affiliations (Harris 1988) and utilize their gang membership to symbolically subvert and/or invert their marginalized socio-cultural status (Brake 1983, Quicker 1983, Moore 1991, Brotherton 1996). Thus, many gangs who are known by their ethnic-based denomination produce a range of race and ethnic-related ideologies which contain such sentiments as upholding their race, fighting the conspiracies of white supremacist culture and developing their imagined “nation” (Conquergood 1997, Brotherton 1998, Esteva 2003).

4.2.2. Family Pressures:

In a number of studies, gang females are shown to be seeking companionship, love, trust and security. With many girls coming from unstable, chaotic, and highly dysfunctional family backgrounds, they have found it difficult if not impossible to develop enduring friendships in school, in the community, or even in the family (Campbell 1984, Miller 2001). This sense of isolation and vulnerability is compounded in families where sexual violence is all too commonplace (Moore 1991, Joe and Chesney-Lynd 1995). Thus, many girls are understandably seeking groups who can promise a sense of refuge, a feeling of protection and social relationships, which are more permeable (Brotherton 1996). Further, gendered constraints on the female can be unbearable in very traditional family cultures and such expectations are thrown into stark relief when set against the more individualistic and liberal family norms for girls of the United States. Likewise, the gang, can present itself very attractively as an alternative extended family with fictive kinship, “respected” older mentors and youth sections as staples of the organization (Moore 1991, Conquergood 1997, Brotherton and Barrios 2003). Meanwhile, gang members often refer to themselves as “brothers,” “cuz,” ”manitos” and “manitas” (brothers and sisters), and in recent years, several gangs have reorganized into large, multi-state, family-like structures.

4.2.3. Economic Survival:

With the majority of gang females drawn from the most economically marginalized strata of the population, it makes sense that a number will be looking to improve their opportunity structure. In certain neighborhoods, the only obvious men of means are the drug dealers (Bourgois 1993) and the only source for income generation is the drugs trade and
associated trades such as prostitution (Maher 1998). For some females associating with gang members and becoming members themselves assures them a certain economic status not available to them under the punitive conditions of welfare/workfare or the segmented labor structures of the legitimate market place.

4.2.4. Family and Community Networks:

It has been widely noted that gang females have been influenced to join by members of their own family and/or their peer groups in certain neighborhoods (Miller 2001). In communities that have the same gangs present for generations, they have become quasi-community institutions (Moore 1991), penetrating both real and fictive kinship networks. As such, gangs have become a normative aspect of females’ and males’ social capital development and offer a range of relationships not all of which are criminal and delinquent (Brotherton and Barrios 2003).

5. Background presentation of the Latin Queens

The New York State Latin Queens were founded in 1991 after a manifesto for the Latin Queens was penned by King Blood, a.k.a Luis Felipe, the First President of the New York State Latin Kings from his prison cell in Attica State Penitentiary. Until that time, there had been no organized group for women who wanted to join the Latin Kings although it was evident that a number of women were drawn to the organization, primarily through boyfriends and husbands. From 1991-1996, the Queens expanded and grew to approximately 60 members. They were called the Naia Tribe of New York State and they would meet separately from the Latin Kings although they would all come together for their monthly general meetings called Universals. Towards the end of this period, the group changed its name from the Almighty Latin Kings to the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation and the role of the Queens began to grow, especially with the prominence of one Queen in particular, Queen Zulma, who married King Blood through the Nation and became one of the most powerful figures in the overall organization of the group.

After 1996, the role of the Queens began to expand even more with the ascension of King Tone to the Inca position (First President) of the New York State A.L.K.Q.N. Under King Tone’s leadership, the rules of the Queens were amended In addition,
rules had been added to the Kings manifesto on how they had to behave towards a Queen and what her explicit role were in the Nation. For the first time the Queens began to put forward their own demands, which challenged some of the discriminatory rules and male privileges of the group, e.g. the right of Latin Kings to have mistresses while Latin Queens can be expelled for the same practice. By 1998, the Queens had grown to more than 200 members throughout New York State and they had split into female-only adult branches in all five boroughs, each with their own leadership structure. In addition, there were a large number of younger females active in the Pee Wee or youth section of the A.L.K.Q.N. These were male and female members under 18 years of age organized in the only co-educational branch of the group, called the Cacique Tribe.

In late 1998, the first female was elected to the Supreme Team of the organization, which was the highest decision-making body in New York State. Although they were greatly outnumbered by male members, the female chapter of the A.L.K.Q.N. called the Latin Queens, represented symbols of motherhood and traditional Latino female roles to the Nation as a whole “the keepers of the castle.” The Queens throughout this period were referred to as the “backbone” of the organization and were highly regarded for their loyalty and support of their Kings and their ability to literally reproduce the Nation, as stated in their prayer. ”We as Queens promise to never let this Nation be stopped, from the reproduction of Kings and Queens. We are also willing to stand by our Kings to the end. We promise to never betray our Kings.” When the reform period of the A.L.K.Q.N ended, contradictions between the Kings and Queens were increasingly apparent as the formal roles of the females conflicted with their newly gained self-confidence and knowledge about their rights as women and Latinas.

6. Interviews - Characteristics of the Sample:

During 1997-1999, I interviewed twenty-eight Latin Queens using a life history interview guide. The ages ranged from 14 - 45 years, with six of the respondents under 18 years of age and therefore members of the Pee Wees, i.e., the co-educational youth section of the group. The length of membership in the organization varied greatly, with some of the younger members having joined six months prior to the interview while three of the oldest females reported having been a members for more than seven years.
In terms of ethnicity, only three respondents were born outside of the United States mainland, in Puerto Rico, whereas of the fifty-six parents, only nine were born in the United States (i.e., 37 were born in Puerto Rico and 10 in the Dominican Republic). With most of the sample coming from second generation families, it is perhaps surprising that only four stated they did not speak Spanish and only two self-identified as “American” with the rest identifying themselves as Nuyorican\textsuperscript{10}, Puerto Rican, or Dominican. Nearly all the respondents reported growing up in one of the barrios or ghettos of New York City with nine describing particularly high rates of residential mobility. In other descriptions of their immediate environment, eighteen said that they lived in areas with both high rates of violence and drug use, while only five felt that their neighborhoods were relatively safe.

The class background of the sample was almost entirely working class, with only six of the parents reporting to be employed in low status white-collar occupations, such as secretaries or dental assistants, and three others that they had fathers in the armed forces. The rest of the fathers (15) were or had been in blue-collar jobs such as construction workers, janitors, merchant seamen and city employees. Two reported that their fathers were or had been full-time criminals. Five respondents described the economic conditions in which they were raised as “comfortable” or “well off,” twelve described them as “poor” or “very poor” and the rest said that they felt they were neither poorer nor richer than others in their community.

The family structures within which the respondents grew up were quite varied. Ten members reported that they were raised in two-parent families. Thirteen were raised by their mothers and the other five by their grandparents, uncles and aunts, or foster parents. The size of the families for most respondents were modest with most reporting one or two siblings and only six respondents stated they came from large families with four or more children. Within many of the families however, there was a strikingly high level of abuse. Ten respondents openly talked about physical beatings by fathers, mothers, spouses, boyfriends and guardians, and of these, four described various levels of sexual abuse by different members of the family including incest.\textsuperscript{11} Eleven respondents said that they had become pregnant as teenagers, i.e., below 17 years of age, with two reporting having had children when they were as young as thirteen years old and one reported having been married at 12 years old.

\textsuperscript{10}Nuyorican is a term used to name a person with Puerto Ricans descent who are born or raised in New York City, USA

\textsuperscript{11}Eleven refused to answer the question, which probably indicates that the rate of abuse was much higher.
In terms of their education, most of the sample attended public schools in the city (25) and five had experienced some form of college with one member attaining a Bachelor’s degree and another was one year away from graduation. However, eleven reported that they had not finished high school and of these seven had dropped out of the system entirely without attaining a General Education Diploma, while four were still attending a secondary education institution. As for criminal histories, eleven reported that they had arrest records and seven more talked about “selling drugs” in the past and engaging in different forms of low level delinquency including assault, graffiti, shop lifting, and status offenses such as running away from home. Five respondents reported having spent some time in prison or juvenile detention center with the maximum sentence of the sample three and half years for a drug offense.

Finally, entry into the A.L.K.Q.N came for the majority (18) via other male members who were their fathers, husbands, brothers or uncles. In all, fifteen respondents stated that they had multiple family members in the organization.

7. Motives for Joining and the Provision of Needs:

In my research with the Latin Queens, I found that these women have been initiated into a family where they are often respected, but seldom seen, or treated as equals by their male counterparts. They had a role and a place in the organization, which was usually submissive yet in other ways, empowering. To be a part of a political, ethnic movement gave them a feeling of satisfaction since they were able to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their children, while ceasing to remain passive in the face of being left behind by mainstream society. They were taking an assertive step forward to change their lives, even if it meant to be seen as savages, violent and a menace to society, now at least they were being noticed. The close support system of the Queens re-affirms their identity as members of the Nation, while also serving to provide a sense of female empowerment and belonging. Separate female tribes meetings allowed the women in the Nation to discuss issues not addressed by the male tribes unique to their life experience.

The respondents though, described their motives for joining either directly or indirectly under a multitude of different themes that spoke to the effects of systematic physical abuse, economic deprivation, health problems, emotional trauma, cultural denial and
family disintegration. I will analyze these in greater depth by breaking them down and contrasting the findings to the four themes identified in the literature.

7.1. Individual and group identity within the group.

The members of the Queens were predominantly second-generation "immigrants" of Puerto Rican or Dominican background, the majority being born and raised in New York City. For female Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, assimilation had posed many challenges. Many of the women took their traditional role with pride and disagreed with their fellow Americanized countrymen who had challenged traditional gender roles. They believe it was just as honorable to be caretakers and home keepers as to perform typical male duties. The Nation, however, even if strict on the above mentioned points did encourage women to educate them selves and work. The organization provides the often-missing structure by giving them cultural identity through its rules and regulations:

"That's when I knew what it was to have a family, what it was to know how -- you know, you gotta go to school, you gotta do your homework, you gotta act like a lady, stop acting like a little boy --because I was the biggest tomboy, you know? That's when I knew about family values and stuff like that. People who cared through The Nation." -Queen S.

In certain aspects the respondents’ discussion of feminine identity was similar to the findings and interpretations of Campbell (1984)\textsuperscript{12} and in other aspects it was not. I found, for example, that respondents spoke of their femininity in terms of: (i) motherhood and being able to school, care and raise their children with some security in their own community, and (ii) standing behind their man/men and being the “backbone” of the Nation. Consequently, I encountered few aspirations of becoming individualistic, middle-class American women or pursuing the American Dream by moving to the suburbs.\textsuperscript{13} On the other hand, all the respondents rejected their roles as stoic sufferers of male privilege and freedom and they all wanted a level of autonomy that, as Latinas, would assure them and their community some

\textsuperscript{12} See page 8 under 4.2.1. Issues of identity:

\textsuperscript{13} The respondents saw the source of their own identity as women contingent on the broader notion of community uplift and empowerment the achievement of which would bring with it a level of resources from which they, as Latinas, could demand both individual and collective respect.
political, economic and social ascent. In the following, two local leaders of the Queens talk about what motivates them as women to be social change agents:

_Camila: Can you talk about Queenism?_

_Queen D: Queenism? To me being a Queen and Queenism is like being strong, being independent, on your own, having the right to speak your mind, being a woman ‘cos not many women could speak their mind. There’s a lot of men who always shut them up and stuff like that and being a Queen...Queenism means power...having power on your own, being independent._

_Camila: We want to get an idea of the people you admire. Who are your heroes/heroines?_

_Queen S: ...I like Gloria Steinhem because I think that she, you know... I don't know about now, but I know back in the days she... was all into equality and pro, pro, pro all this (i.e., groups like the Latin Queens - author), you know? She was just like the ultimate role model for someone to look up to when they wanted to learn what bein’ a woman was all about. She was one of my role models. I don't know who else is my role model. Mostly all my role models are women; I don't have any male role models._

Part of this construction of the Queens’ collective feminine identity is based on a basic tenet of the Nation’s ideology that there should be no divisions between males and females and that both genders must subscribe to Nation unity at all times. However, since the Nation allows the women to organize separately there is an implicit recognition that female members have their own concerns and require their own spatial autonomy to better empower themselves. The Nation, therefore, offers two possibilities of womanhood that merge both old and new traditions: (i) a form of membership that might be described as unity in diversity, and (ii) the acceptance of certain tenets of Marianismo, i.e., commitment to children, child-rearing and loyalty to one’s partner, while rejecting a third tenet, docility and stoicism.

The second aspect of identity that was powerfully present in most of the respondents’ accounts was identification with their racial and ethnic heritage. For most respondents, whether they were fully or only half Puerto Rican or Dominican, they unambiguously claimed their Latino roots and bristled at the notion that they might be considered “American.”
Camila: OK. Do you feel that you are Americanized now?

Queen H: That I'm American what?

Camila: Americanized. That you're more American, that you are more heavily influenced by the American culture?

Queen H: I'm always gonna be Boricua \(^{14}\) no matter what. American or no American, that's my heritage. That's where I was born at. If they think 'cos we, that Puerto Rico is a part of the States, that they control some of that... but I'm still one hundred percent Boricua. I would never say, "I'm American." No, 'cos I know where I come from.

Many new members would usually, within a few weeks, get their first taste of street politics, finding themselves marching for: members of their community being victims to police brutality, and on issues related to Puerto Rican political prisoners, public education, and AIDS funding, and attending weekly culture classes organized by the group. The following field notes were taken at one of the Queens’ culture sessions organized in Manhattan:

Field Notes from Charas Community Center, November 2\(^{nd}\) 1997

“Maria is leading the culture class...the class today is about Julia de Burgos, a Puerto Rican female writer. Before Maria reads from a long text about the author’s life, she warns the sisters that they are going to get tested on the text afterwards, hence they better listen up. First, she walks around the circle and shows each one of us present the photo of the author. Then she starts reading the text while walking around the circle. She is talented. She manages to read clear and loud even when she is walking and she is able to explain difficult words here and there. After reading the entire text, she starts asking questions...The Queens do pretty good even though only a few are answering most of the questions.”

On the question, who are your heroes? Queen S responded:

"Lolita LeBron. I love her. I swear I do. She was part like of an organization that used to go around to all of the Latin countries and fight for independence for Puerto Rico she went

---

\(^{14}\) Boricua is a person from Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans most often call themselves Boricua
around everywhere by herself with no money. This is why I know it can be done, if one person can set their mind and heart and everything to do it, it can be done"

As the Queens increasingly engage their own history, relating it to a political practice of the present, they begin to: (i) discover new role models from whom they can draw inspiration, (ii) become convinced that the status quo can and has to be challenged, and (iii) come to terms with the part played by their own community in socially reproducing their own subordination. Below, Queen S and Queen H respond to questions about the nature of their political consciousness:

"I joined to show our people that we don't have to take what society says that we have to. We don't have to be second-class citizens in America, you know, that we can achieve the American dream.” - Queen H.

"I want to bring people together as one so that the government, the city, the state, the world, could hear our voice I want the Puerto Ricans to know they did something for themselves education has to get much better the tax money, what are they doing to it, a lot of it is being used for jails--less on schools, less on after school programs A lot of young females don't know how it is to be respected because they don't know how to respect themselves. A lot of money is used on the rich neighborhoods, why can't they use them in the poor neighborhoods?"

Queen S

For some, however, this unambiguous declaration of ethnic selfhood, in the context of a highly racialized society (Winant1994), was much more complex and it spoke as much to the contradictoriness of race/ethnic formation within the A.L.K.Q.N itself (Conquergood 1997) as it did to the hierarchical pressures of the dominant culture. 15 For many females who had grown up in mixed race families or who had dated males from other racial categories and

15 In New York City, the A.L.K.Q.N has long claimed that it is an organization dedicated to uphold the Latino community and that, in its original New York manifesto, it states that no “morenos” (blacks) would be allowed into the organization. However, in the reformed Nation there was a struggle to rid the organization of its anti-black past and to accept a much wider race and ethnic-based membership. During the latter part of the research, the A.L.K.Q.N was beginning to pay much greater to both the Puerto Rican and the Dominican members” African heritage, which hitherto had only been tangentially acknowledged in the Nation’s ideology.
had faced prejudice and/or discrimination for the “sin” of crossing racial boundaries, the new Nation’s racial openness was a welcome port in the storm. I found that in this category were the females that after interviewing them, I would not find any obvious reason for joining. Most of them were in college and come from a middle class family, with no explicitly violent incidents or situations in their lives. What I found though was that they were more Americanized than anybody else as well as children of bi-racial parents. They experienced pressure from society to choose how they were going to identify themselves, Black, white, or Latina. Joining had been their way of affirming the Latina side of themselves. Sometimes even a feeling of hatred towards the "other" culture would be expressed. The organization became to them a way of affirming their cultural and ethnic identity. Here they would learn about their heritage, Latin-American history, and find Latin American heroes whom they had never been exposed to.

Queen D: I said to mom, “Why you told me don't go out with a black guy?” My father is more black than the blacks. I'm gonna show you a picture of my father. He's really, really black. I said to her, "What kind of mistake am I?" I never loved my mother because of that. In her family, they look at my father, they don't wanna talk to my father, you know what I'm sayin'? It bothers me 'cos that's in my blood, that's my father, I'm willing to die for him... Recently, I decided to go to college. When I was doing the application, you know, they say, "What you are? Spanish, Black, Indian, American?".. all that crazy stuff. And I say, "I don't have to put none of that shit. I'm everything, I mark everything, because I'm like everything. I'm American, I'm African, I'm everything. Puerto Rico's got everything from everybody. We Africanos, we Americans, we Indian, we're Spanish, we're from everywhere.

7.2. Family pressures and the relieving role of the group.

In concurrence with some of the literature: (i) many of the respondents joined the A.L.K.Q.N looking for a symbolic family to replace the one they had experienced, and (ii) a majority of all these women came from traumatic social backgrounds, suffering high rates of violence in their homes which often forced them to move out or run away at a very early age, some as young as nine years old. However, unlike almost all the literature, most of the respondents found they could not get out of the violence cycle (Widom 1998) until they encountered the Nation, which became the only viable mechanism for escape from the rituals of daily abuse. Once in the Nation respondents reported that their true family life began as
they learned to trust and rely on older men and women, perhaps for the first time. They also spoke of the Nation not simply as a surrogate family but as a supplement to the family they already had. In a number of cases, the Nation functioned as a kind of weigh station, a social support system that helped the respondents to heal from their previous wounds until they were strong enough to repair the bonds with their true blood relations, if they so desired. There were five central sub-themes that ran through the motives, which I have categorized as follows:

### 7.2.1. In search of security, safety and support

Many of the respondents spoke of suffering violence from either one or both parents, uncles, brothers, foster parents, guardians, spouses, and/or boyfriends. A number of the parents who beat their children were drug and/or alcohol addicted, and the beatings would come when the parent was mostly “high.” Sometimes the beatings from the men would be part of a pattern of sexual abuse. The women reported that they had few options to stop these assaults unless a state agency intervened and at least six of the respondents talked of being removed from their parent(s)’ home as a child or as an adolescent. In the following, Queen Fr describes being physically abused by both her guardians:

*Camila: OK. How about your uncle? You don't have any conflicts with him anymore?*

_Queen Fr: No, because, see, my little sister ran away. She's a runaway. They're lookin for her. We don't have contact cuz the last time I seen him he tried to hit me cuz he was running after my sister tryin’ to get my sister and the reason why we don't have contact with each other is because I went and I told the social worker that he used to hit me, his boyfriend used to hit me, and the boyfriend used to try to get fresh with me, so I told her and that's why we don't have contact with each other.*

In many cases, the beatings only stopped when the subject encountered members of the Nation who assured her that the organization could be relied upon for support in the form of a refuge and sometimes physical intervention. Occasionally female members

---

16 Both sisters were living with their mother who was dying from AIDS at the time. They had been forced to live with their homosexual uncle by social agencies.
had been rescued by a King from dangerous situations, such as abusive relationships and brought to the Nation.

When I asked Queen I how she had learned about the organization she replied:

**Queen I: The Nation? I didn't really learn about it, the Nation saved my life...almost 12 years ago. I was married at the age of 12, OK? And my husband was chosen for me so it wasn't the right choice. For 10 years I took abuse, beatings, insults and I had 4 kids. One day on the beach, my husband came back because his mistress had left him, and that's the only time I was ever happy, when he had a mistress. He wouldn't hit me. He came by, he took an aluminum baseball bat, broke all my ribs, both my legs, my arm, and he was ready to strike on my head when a Latin King stepped in and said, "You hit her again and we're gonna give it to you to see how you like it." You know? A while after that, my husband passed away. He had a truck accident and uh, I was a mass of nothing. I don't even consider myself at that time a human, you know? Cuz if you would speak a little loud to me, I was already ducking and covering myself 'cos I thought you were gonna' hit me. You know? They made me what I am today. I could withstand everything and anything God dishes up to me today. That was when I came to my Nation.**

7.2.2. An alternative to Rejection and Abandonment:

Many parents not only beat their children but they rejected and abandoned them as well. The act of abandonment seemed to come mainly from mothers who were going through the traumas of addiction to crack and/or heroin. These female members had a very traumatic upbringing. Their parents whose drug addiction had deeply affected their relationship, had not been able to take care of them because they were either in prison, or were so high on drugs that they had neglected their children. These women had been exposed to domestic violence and moved out at a very early age, some as young as nine years. Most of them had repeated the cycle of violence until the Nation became their family. Where they finally had found support.
Camila: Who took you away?

Queen G: B.C.W (Bureau of Child Welfare). I didn't really see my mom a lot. I wouldn't see my mom for like periods of two years each. Um... then she came around when I was about eleven. She had my other little sister. They took her away from her and she still hasn't lived with my mom, my little sister. She stays with my aunt. Then my mom got drugs four years ago and from drugs she jumped a guy and it's like guys are just like drugs. I was always second, left home alone to take care of the kids again, you know, and she basically did this till about January when I got fed up of it. I'm basically the mother and she's the child and I don't feel like bein’ a mother to nobody cuz I don't have to be and I gave her hell. I gave her a little bit taste of her medicine, how she felt. She couldn't handle it so she moved out the house and left me for like three or four months without paying rent. She didn't give me money for food; she didn't give me money for clothes. The last time I went clothes shopping was two years ago and her ex-boyfriend bought me clothes. She never gave me money for anything.

If the mothers were often guilty of abandoning or neglecting their children then the fathers were primarily responsible for rejecting their offspring, sometimes simply because they were girls and not boys. Queen E, below, is one of five respondents who spoke of fathers who openly denied their parenthood:

Camila: How about, like you say, you have no contact with your dad, but you know who he is. How come? Is he the dad to all the other sisters, too?

Queen E: No. Because my mother told me he just didn't want me 'cos I was a girl, I heard, and then I heard that he didn't want me, he told my mother that if she had me he was gonna kick her stomach and not have me and she gave birth to me and ever since then, like when I was 12, he told me, "You're not my daughter", and I was like, "I know", and I just kept on walking. I mean, I know that's my father, but he's denied me.
7.2.3. Seeking Independence:

All the females wanted some form of increased autonomy in their lives as noted in the literature (Brotherton 1996, Chesney-Lind and Joe 1998). They wanted to be rid of their family’s restrictive ties on their social lives and on their sexuality; they wanted to be free of abusive relationships and of disrespectful men in general; and they wanted the freedom to be “somebody” through continuing their education and eventually choosing a career beyond the options normally reserved for children of the barrio. Queen A and Queen E below, respond to questions on their home life and leave no doubt about the clash between parents who tried to enforce the old gendered family traditions of the “island” and the more liberal approaches to the urban family in New York:

They belong to the fourth category that I found: the women whose parents had recently emigrated from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic and kept their cultural tradition alive. Unfortunately their parents, being scared of what their daughter could be exposed to in such a different and new culture, kept the girls in a very controlled and strict environment. They would not be allowed to socialize or go out after school, or to engage in post curricular activities. This led to an extreme isolation and alienation from "natural" teenage behavior and friendship relations. Often these girls had rebelled by joining the organization and inherently acquired a large amount of friends. One of the most strongly held rules in the organization is that you have to love one another no matter what and get along with your sisters and brothers. Many of these girls got in through their boyfriend who was a King. When Queen H and Queen B is asked about her extra-curricular activities and how she got involved:

“I was always home. Always home. I guess the way my mother brought me up, it was the women who have to stay in the house. Most of the time always home, home, home, helping my mom. I didn't have many friends--girlfriends no ...With the Nation I got involved by my ex husband -- he mainly got involved first”. Queen H

“my father was too overprotective cuz I was the only girl. He didn't even let me stand next to a guy cuz he would have screamed at me or somethin, so I used to go to school, go to work, and after work, go home, sleep, do the same thing over and over again.” Queen B

Because of the history of colonization experienced by their parents’ homeland, members were in a constant search for cultural identity and reaffirmation in an environment that would praise Latino tradition. While in the American society, these women were being exposed to feminist values of equal rights and opportunity, yet they were stripped of such
rights by affirming their ethnic heritage. While joining the gang becomes the main route towards empowerment, traditional Latino ideals of the female role in culture were internalized by many of the women unwilling to disrupt the already-fragile politics of the Nation by insisting upon gender equality. By affirming their roots, even if they were ironically enough going back to earlier oppressors, the Spaniards gave them a feeling of control and pride. They formed part of something powerful— an ancient and rich cultural tradition.

"Every time I needed money, my father gave me money. If my brother needed money, my father said, "Go get a job!" A woman is in the house and men is in the streets getting a job" Queen H

In this micro society everything that they represented, which was seen as negative and to their disadvantage by the mainstream society, such as their culture, was valued and glorified.

"A Queen always holds her head up high." Queen D.

“I had a lot of rules and regulations. I could never go outside, I could never have a boyfriend, I could never be with my friends, or nothin’ I would just have to come home, do my homework, eat, take a shower, and then go to bed and then go to school the next day.” Queen H

7.2.4. The surrogate family:
The literature notes that in certain cases, females, particularly at the beginning of their gang tenure, can view the group as a replacement family. Certainly, the Nation in its manifesto and prayers constantly refers to itself as a greater Latino family that provides unconditional love and acceptance to those who are privileged to become members and this same sentiment was reflected in many of the respondents’ retorts:

Camila: What does family mean to you?

Queen Sh: All my Latin King/Queen Nation.

Camila: And how do you define that?
Queen Sh: Beautiful. Love, respect, I'm treated like gold, you know, like I should've been treated, you know? That's my life. You know, if I fall they're there to pick me up. They raised me, you know? I grew up in it.

However, there are few reports in the literature of cases where older male members of a group both formally and informally adopt young females who have been victimized, abandoned by their rightful kin or caught up in a detrimental lifestyle. Yet, this practice was not at all uncommon in the A.L.K.Q.N (I should also add that some older females also adopted younger males).

"I have a father through the Nation, you know? He adopted me through the court system. That's when I first joined the Nation and I was in trouble with the law and they helped me out big time, you know? --- They would always help me when I had a problem with my boyfriend. They was always there for me. It was just a family to me before I came in." Queen S

Camila: OK. Are you closer to your mother or your father?

Queen B: Um, see, I'm a daddy's little girl 'cos I have so much hate for my mom. Not hate, but she put me through so much shit it's like everybody want me to swallow it and I just can't. I've been swallowin' it for too many years, and I'm a daddy's little girl, but I never had a daddy. That's where King Step comes in. Now I'm a daddy's little girl 'cos that's my daddy.

Queen I who was rescued from being beaten to dead had adopted several Kings her self.

Queen I: I love all my children by the Nation. They do not have anybody to care for them. So I write to them in prison and send them soap, toothpaste, little things that they need in there. When they come out I through them a party and cook their favorite dish.
7.2.5. The Complementary Family:

Much of the gang intervention literature paints the gang-family connection in highly simplistic and alarmist terms, portraying persons who join gangs as virtually bereft of past family ties. This was not at all the case with most of the respondents, however, who emphasized repeatedly that the Nation-family nexus was complex, flexible and subject to change over time. Certainly, as I have noted, when the member came from a particularly destructive family background the Nation played a surrogate family role but for those members who came into the Nation from high functioning and cohesive family backgrounds it was a different picture.

Camila: What does family mean to you?

Queen Fr: Now? I mean, since I've been in the Nation family means a lot to me, but my mother and my sisters they mean the world. They mean the world. My mother and my sister, but the Nation, they mean the world to me, too. I mean, I love the Nation to death.

In other words, often the family-Nation relationship was quite complementary for female members and several leaders reported working diligently with parents to get their children back into school and/or to bring more discipline and social control into their lives (e.g. imposing 10pm curfews on young female members during weekdays). Since Nation members under-18 years old have to get their parents’ permission to join the group, it can be understood why the organization can have a much more open, reciprocal and supportive relationship with a member’s family than is supposed by many outside the group.

7.3. Economic survival and the supporting role of the group.

In a number of studies researchers have found females participating as gang members in the illicit market place driven by blocked opportunities. Among the Queens, respondents spoke of many different types of support related to improving their economic standing but none of it was related to the illegal, informal economy.

The respondents referred to the following kinds of aid that the group offered: (i) help during pregnancy such as the holding of baby showers to provide clothes and furniture for the new baby; (ii) babysitting for single mothers to help them navigate the welfare system and
attend job interviews; (iii) employment contacts in the legitimate economy, especially in the non-profit sector; (iv) referrals to job training services, particularly women facing new welfare/workfare regulations; (v) help with housing, e.g. keeping a list of friendly landlords and when necessary providing temporary housing for homeless Queens; (vi) educational support for Queens attending school or GED\textsuperscript{17} classes, including in-house tutoring and peer pressure to succeed, and (vii) short term loans from a Queens welfare fund (set up in 1999 with female members contributing $5 per month). Below, a member explains the Queens attitude to mutual aid:

*Camila: Tell me about how you resolve some of your conflicts?*

*Queen D: ...there's always problems as for the school...The girls sometimes they have kids and it's hard so they need somebody to listen to them... we always do, no matter what. We are always there in good and bad situations. We are always there and always there to help them. It's hard, 'cos, you know, with bein' a mother goin' to work and goin' to school ...We're there. Day or night. If it's in the meeting or it's not in the meeting, we'll call each other and we'll speak upon it and they'll feel relief. They always tell me, "Thank you, my sister. I needed that." There's times I always need someone to talk to and they're always there. I can never say they're never there for me. They are always there. Always.*

*Camila: So what kind of conflicts most frequently occurs within the group?*

*Queen D: ... you know, the babies and schooling... when they need pampers or they need this...we're there. You know, it's little things but we always got each other and we be strong and we support them and the conflict goes away real quick and they'll go right away and do what they gotta do. Yeah.*

*Camila: So the conflicts get resolved by talkin' or . . .?*

\textsuperscript{17} The initials GED stand for General Educational Development. It is a test that allows students who have not finished high school to quickly get credentials equivalent to a high school diploma so that they can go on to college.
Queen D: Yeah, or if they need an economic way with money we always there...It comes out of our pockets. They ain't nothing to it. If somebody needs something, there you go. There's always a helping hand. There's never nobody that tells us no. It's always somebody there to help us.

7.4. Community/Family Networks-the importance of kinship connections:

As in many studies on gang process (Short and Strodneck 1966, Thrasher 1927) dealing with peer influences and kinship connections, a number of females reported that it was a “natural thing” for them to join the group. In essence in their neighborhood to be in a gang had become the norm, it was harder to stay "neutral" than to inquire about membership and, if accepted, enter the first stage of induction (called “Five Alive”). Respondents who reported membership via these channels spoke of getting caught up in the moment, or joining, because it made sense in the environmental context that they lived in encountering Kings and Queens as part of their friendship networks or as immediate family members. The majority of these girls became members of the Nation through contacts with male members. Frequently they were her boyfriend, or a male relative such as a brother, father, uncle, or cousin. If they were not related to the male member, they had usually seen or met him when "hanging out" in their neighborhood. Common meeting places include local parks, handball courts, or outside of their apartment buildings. Only a small minority joined through their female friends. Although, towards the end of the research as the Queens grew, I noticed that a number of new Pee Wee recruits were being brought to meetings via female contacts.

When asked how Queen SH got involved she said:

I have family in it. I have cousins probably three and people I grew up with, everybody's in it, and then my family was in it so wherever I would go there was Kings - always Kings - anywhere I would go there was always Kings, and so I started hanging out with them.

When asked the same question, Queen G responded:

"I was just always around them, regardless. They -- it just became a way of life, naturally . . . I would look at the Kings and stuff like that and my cousin, he was in it since he was real young, um, my mother was into jail. She's become a Queen, too. It just happened. It just started. You know, I was always with them."

---

18 Neutral is slang for a person who does not belong to, or favor any gang in particular
8. Conclusion. The role of the gang as an anti-discriminatory tool

As I have stated, most Queens come from backgrounds where racism, sexism, poverty and limited opportunities are prevalent. They joined the Nation and created an identity of resistance\(^{19}\) constructing “forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression” (Castells, 2000:9). They search for empowerment, identity, and support to compensate for a life in which they have often been left to fend for themselves as children and then left with minimal supports to take care of their own children. For most of these women, social institutions have failed them or they have been largely absent. The schools they attended did a better job of alienating them than educating them, the families they emerged from were often driven with inner conflict and turmoil, the male relationships they were exposed to fell short of their needs and sometimes were purely based on abuse.

Further, gang female self-representation can be seen as an audacious act of self- and collective defiance in behalf of highly marginalized, stigmatized and colonized populations (Mendoza-Denton 1995). These are factors that have played an important role in these women’s live contributing to their deviant choice.

---

\(^{19}\) Definition of Identity of Resistance.

“Identity of resistance is generated by those actors that are in positions/ conditions devalued and/ or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” (Castells M 2000, p.8)
9. Bibliography


Appendix

1.1. The flow of and the effects of the monetary award on the interviews

The girls that were interviewed did not know when I asked them to participate that the Nation would be rewarded economically. Not until the interview came to an end did I bring up the monetary reward. During the two years that I conducted interviews the flow and access to interviews varied. Sometimes the girls would come forward themselves. They wanted to tell their story, or be sure we got their version of why they were part of the Nation. When I interviewed the pee-wees they were always picked out by an older member, hence told to take part in the interview. These interviews were often more difficult, you could feel that they were hesitant in their answers. A few times when I had problems with members showing up to an appointed interview I had to ask higher-ranking members to help me out. This would most of the times have a positive snowball effect on other members. Finally, I chose and asked some of the members to participate either because of their ranking in the Nation or because they had been members for a long time thus had much knowledge on the history of the Nation. Shortly after King Tone was arrested and trailed the Nation suffered internal divisions and went underground. I could no longer conduct interviews and feel safe. Thus the interview process stopped. The project felt that we had material sufficient to be able to analyze the data.
1.2. Short on the female members quoted in the paper

The female members quoted in the paper are:

Queen S
She was born in New York. She comes from an abusive family. Her mother used and sold crack. She had to take to the streets when she was nine years old. King B saved her from the streets and brought her to the Nation. He is her father through the Nation. She has served time at a juvenile facility for selling drugs. She is at the time of the interview nineteen years of age. Last time I saw her she was working at a record store and was expecting a baby. The baby was totally unexpected, as she had been told that she would never be able to have one after a terrible rape she had been subject to.

Queen Sh
Born and raised in poor stricken neighborhoods New Jersey, both her parents are born in New York. Her roots are Puerto Rican as three of her grandparents were born there. Her mother died when she was seven years old. She moved away from home when she was fourteen to live with her boyfriend with whom she had a baby boy. Now she is a single mother living in the Bronx in New York City. She shares a five-room apartment with two other Queens and her sister who no longer is a Queen. She was almost fifteen years when she got involved with the Nation and she has been a member for almost four years at the time of the interview. She has four male cousins that were in the Nation before her.

Queen D
She was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Came to New York when she was twenty-one. She came without her parents. Stayed with her sister but now she shares a three-bedroom apartment with another Queen and her young son. She has no contact with her family any more. She was put in prison by her mother at age thirteen and served seven years for a crime she claims to be innocent of committing. She is twenty-three years at the time of the interview. Her boyfriend is in prison but will soon be released and they will then move in together. During the time I did the research she became a very powerful Queen within the Nation.

Queen H
Born in Puerto Rico, moved to New York when she was nine years. At the time of the interview she was 25 years old. She is a divorced single mother with two children and works at a real-estate office. Used to be married to a Latin King. She got involved in the organization through him. She had few or no friends as a child. Was brought up with strict traditional values. Was not allowed to go out after school by her father.

Queen F
Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Her parents came with their families when they were children. She has lived all her life in the poorest and most violent neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Got arrested and served one year in juvenile hall when she was fourteen for selling drugs. Now she lives with her grandmother and baby-girl. At the age of sixteen shortly after coming out of juvenile hall, she became a member of another gang. Four years later she joined the Nation at age twenty. She had only been a member for a few months at the time of the interview.
Queen I
Born in New York and raised with traditional values. Her father was Italian and married her to a fifteen years older man when she was thirteen years. She moved with him to California where she was a housewife and took care of their two children. Her husband was physically and mentally abusive to her. She met the Kings when they literally saved her from getting beaten to death by her husband. Soon after her husband died in a car accident. The King that saved her life was diagnosed with AIDS. When Queen I found out that he was about to be sentenced for a major crime thus risked dying in prison, she claimed that she had committed the crime to the judge. She took his ten-year prison penalty so that he could die at home in peace. At the time of the interview Queen I was forty-two years of age and had disability.

Queen B
Queen B was born in Puerto Rico and so were her parents. When she was five years old her parents divorced and she was sent to live with her grandmother in New York with her oldest brother. Her two other siblings stayed with her mother. She was brought up with strong traditional values and was a straight A student. At age sixteen she met her husband and got pregnant. He is also a member of the Nation. They have three children and have problems with their living situation. Until recently they were living in a shelter but now the government is helping them out and they live in the projects. She has not finished school and has no GRE exam.

Queen Fr
Queen Fr has been a member for six months. She was born in New York but her mother was born in from Puerto Rico. At the time of the interview she was seventeen years old. Queen Fr, and her fourteen-year-old sister live with her mother who is a former drug addict. Their mother is dying of AIDS and has lost the custody of her children. Her uncle has custody of them but he is very strict and does not allow the girls any extracurricular activities. They have fled from their homosexual uncle because he used to hit them and his boyfriend flirted with her. Her father who lives on the same block denies her and ignores her when they see each other on the street. She does not go to school any more as she spends great time of her day taking care of her mother who is very weak.

Queen G
Queen G is twenty years old at the time of the interview. She was born in New York but her parents were born in Puerto Rico. Her mother and stepfather are both in and out of prison for selling drugs. Her biological father recently died of AIDS. When she was nine years old her mother got arrested. Her father took her to Puerto Rico there she stayed for two years and was send back as he had a gambling habit and failed on taking care of her. At the age of eleven she went to live on the streets of New York. She started selling and abusing drugs herself. When she was thirteen she was using heroin. That is when she met her husband who is two years older than her. He is a King and brought her to the Nation where she managed to get off the drugs. At age thirteen they were moved in together and had a baby but lost it. At age fifteen they had another one. Now they have to children. She is on welfare and lives in a small one-bedroom apartment. He lives apart from them as he got a job and they need the welfare money. Last I heard from G she was doing time in prison for selling drugs.