

# Machismo, Marianismo and Mental Health of Ecuadorian Adolescents in the United States

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Figure 1: Ecuadorian day parade in Jackson Heights, NY (Parry, 2022)

## Introduction

Gender, as a social construct, encompasses various identities related to the biological sexes of male and female. Understanding gender dynamics can be illuminated through Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of multiple systems crucial to a person's development from childhood to adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this intricate web of systems, cultural and societal influences play a pivotal role in shaping gender roles, which, in turn, impact the mental health of adolescents. These roles that one identifies with play a significant role in the shaping of individuals' identities and experiences, specifically when it comes to understanding their psychological effects. However, what is important to note are the cultural differences that exist within this world of gender roles, especially within the Latinx community. Specifically, in these countries, the concept of machismo is introduced.

## *Terminology*

**Gender:** a constantly evolving social construct that encompasses the social divisions of the male and female biologies while taking ethnicity and class into account (Stone and McKee, 2002)

**Gender Relations and Sexual Division of labor:** work that is assigned a the tasks of society according to gender, usually based off of the male and female biological sexes (Ward and Edelstein, 2006).

**Marianismo:** set of values and expectations concerning female gender roles with an emphasis on the role of women as family- and home-oriented, encouraging self sacrifice and passivity (Nuñez et al, 2016)

**Machismo:** set of values, based off of the role of men in society, that encompasses positive and negative aspects of masculinity such as: dominance, sexism and reserved emotions (Nuñez et al, 2016).

This terminology is deeply ingrained in Latin American cultures, emphasizing traditional masculine values such as dominance, toughness, and emotional suppression. Yet, most of the information that we have on this concept focuses on Mexico or other Latinx countries; rarely, any studies have been educated to Ecuadorian families. The Ecuadorian population in the states, focusing on New York, has continued to increase dramatically over the last couple of years (Pribilsky, 2007). This brief is about the relationship between the gender and mental health of adolescents in Ecuadorian immigrant communities in the U.S. To fully understand what these culturally significant differences of machismo in Ecuador play on the mental health of Ecuadorian adolescents in the U.S, we must start from the beginning to prove that there is a mental health disparity among the mental health studies dedicated to adolescents of Ecuadorian background. This research can contribute to the development of culturally sensitive mental health strategies for Ecuadorian adolescents while informing people about these effects on the well-being of Ecuadorian adolescents in America, since there is very little research conducted on this demographic.

## *Theory of Gender*

To be able to understand what machismo means in the Latinx context, it is important to understand a basic theory of gender. According to the World Health Organization, gender refers to the social construct of characteristics used to describe men and women (World Health Organization, 2019). It is a complex social construct that encompasses a set of roles, behaviors, and expectations attributed to individuals based on their perceived or assigned sex. The basic theory of gender seeks to understand how societies define and enforce these roles, influencing the way individuals express their identity. Within this framework, the concept of machismo, deeply rooted in Latin American cultures, epitomizes a form of gender expression that emphasizes traditional masculine values. These values include dominance, toughness, and emotional suppression, shaping societal expectations and individual behaviors.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity is a foundational perspective in gender studies, exploring the ways in which dominant forms of masculinity are constructed and

maintained in a given social context. It recognizes that these social constructions are not static but rather shaped by power dynamics, culture, and historical context. Examining gender through this lens is essential for understanding the cultural significance of machismo in Ecuador and its potential impact on the mental health of Ecuadorian adolescents in the U.S.

## *Ecuadorian Migration to the U.S*

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The migration of Ecuadorian families to the United States signifies a complex journey, characterized by both challenges and opportunities that intricately shape the lives of individuals, with a particular emphasis on adolescents. Ecuadorians constitute one of the largest immigrant communities in metropolitan New York. While emigration was minimal before the 1960s, the early 1980s witnessed a surge in Ecuadorians leaving their homeland due to a drastic collapse in oil prices. Although many Ecuadorians found settlement in the New York City area, others ventured to major cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. This migration trend persisted with the devaluation of Ecuador's currency, the sucre, prompting more individuals to seek economic stability in either the U.S. or Spain. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as indicated in the figure above, approximately 500,000 Ecuadorians resided in the United States as of 2005. While this figure is presumed to have increased in the last decade, it remains notably smaller compared to other Latin American countries, such as Mexico (Jokisch, 2007). Recognizing the dearth of research on this demographic underscores the importance of closely examining the migration patterns of Ecuadorian people. Doing so is crucial in diminishing the tendency to categorize all Latin Americans under a broad umbrella, emphasizing the unique experiences and contributions of Ecuadorian immigrants.

Economic reasons, political instability, and the pursuit of better educational prospects are among the factors driving this migration. As families navigate the complexities of adapting to a new cultural context, they bring with them a rich tapestry of traditions, including the deeply ingrained concept of machismo. In Ecuadorian culture, machismo plays a pivotal role in shaping social norms and familial dynamics. The migration process itself can amplify the impact of machismo, as individuals grapple with the clash between traditional values and the evolving dynamics of the host society.

Machismo and marianismo becomes a significant aspect of Ecuadorian migration as families negotiate the preservation of cultural identity within the context of a new and often diverse cultural landscape. The traditional expectations associated with machismo, such as rigid gender roles and the emphasis on masculine strength, can influence family structures and interpersonal relationships. The adaptation to a new society may bring about tensions as individuals, especially adolescents, navigate between the cultural expectations ingrained in machismo and marianismos and the evolving norms in the United States. Understanding how machismo is perpetuated or challenged during the migration process is crucial for comprehending the unique challenges faced by Ecuadorian adolescents in the U.S. and its potential impact on their mental health.

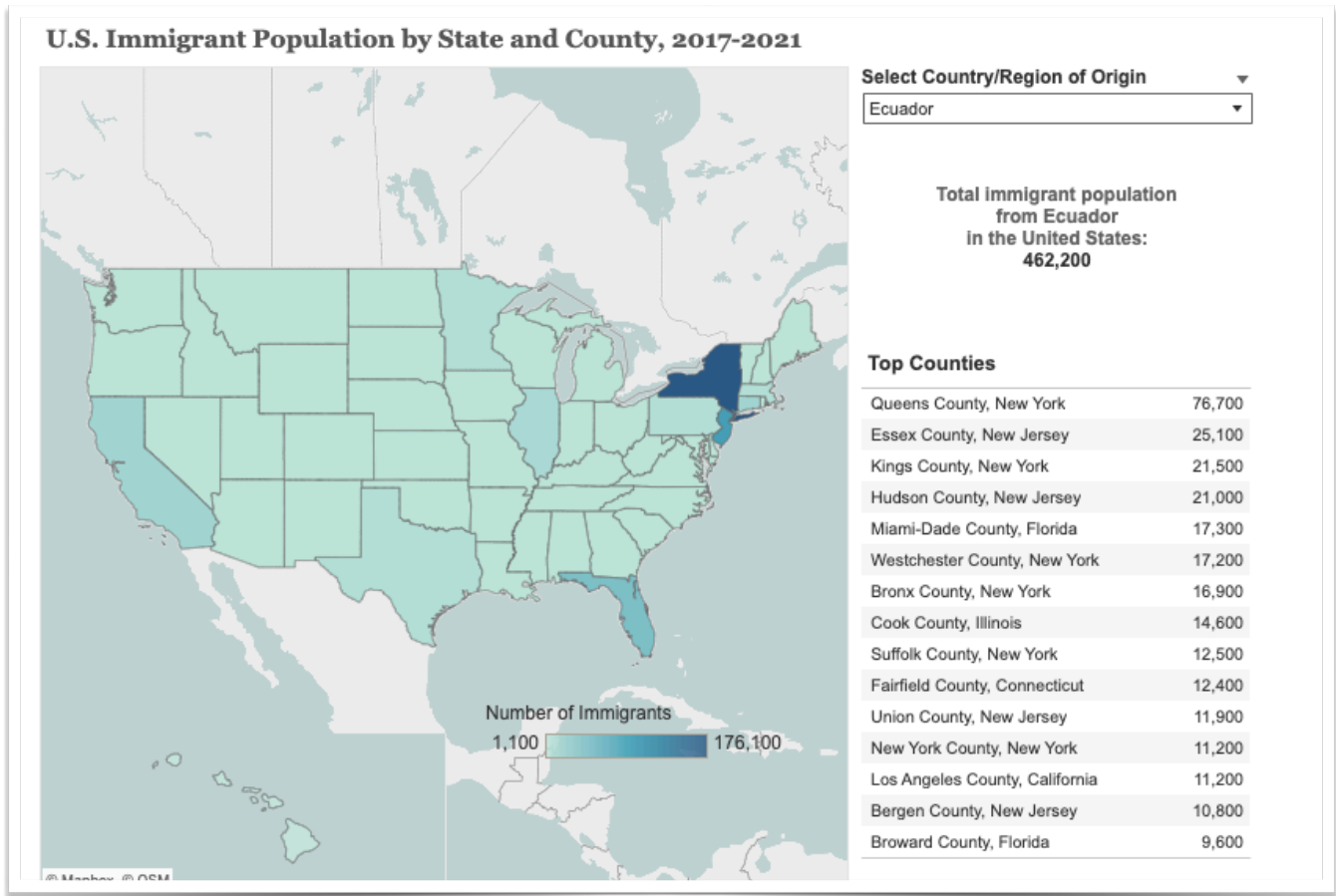


Figure 2: U.S Immigrant Population by State and County, 2007-2021. The image illustrates the concentration of Ecuadorians in the North East, particularly in New York and New Jersey

## *Machismo and Marianismo*

Machismo, deeply rooted in Ecuadorian culture, exerts a profound influence on family dynamics and gender roles within immigrant communities. This form of sexism is perpetuated by male Latinos who encourage the younger generation to embody patriarchal ideals, emphasizing strength and dominance. Adolescents, caught in the crosscurrents of traditional gender norms and evolving societal expectations in the U.S., often grapple with these conflicting pressures, leading to acculturative stress. Parallel to Machismo, Marianismo represents its female counterpart, delineating a set of values that shape gender roles among Ecuadorian adolescents. Marianismo compels Latinas to adopt a persona characterized by passivity, chastity, and purity (Sanchez, 2017). These cultural ideologies instill a set of rules within Latinx households, dictating specific expectations for adolescent Latinos and Latinas.

For adolescent Latinos, conforming to machismo involves demonstrating toughness and manliness, often engaging in activities like underage drinking and participating in sexual behaviors as dictated by older generations (Llamas et al., 2020). On the other hand, adolescent Latinas are expected to uphold the family's honor by steering clear of impure activities related to sexuality while focusing on caretaking duties within the home. A study on Mexican American adolescent

girls explored the correlation between gender role attitudes and mental health, specifically examining the impact of marianismo. This pioneering research revealed a direct connection between marianismo and machismo, influencing substance use habits among adolescents, thereby affecting their mental health outcomes (Sanchez, 2017).

While the study focused on Mexican American adolescents, its implications extend to Latino adolescents, including those of Ecuadorian descent in the United States. These findings explore the struggle adolescents face in traditional gender norms with evolving societal expectations. In response, machismo and marianismo have detrimentally influenced the gender development of Latino boys and girls, fostering behavioral imbalances due to unrealistic expectations, impacting mental health outcomes, suppressing emotional expression, and obscuring the role of gender expression in shaping identity and relationships (Pina-Watson et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the existing stigma surrounding mental health within the Latinx community acts as a formidable obstacle to seeking and receiving the necessary support. Mental health in Latinx adolescents is a nuanced and dynamic facet influenced by a myriad of factors, including cultural, societal, and individual elements. Latinx adolescents encounter distinctive stressors linked to acculturation, identity formation, and familial expectations at higher frequencies than their counterparts from an Anglo background (Sanchez, 2017). The intersectionality of cultural backgrounds adds layers of complexity to their mental health journey as they navigate the delicate balance between preserving their heritage and adapting to the cultural intricacies of their host country. As illustrated in Figure 3, a discernible correlation exists between a decline in mental health and the adherence to Latinx gender role identities. Ecuadorian adolescents in the U.S. confront various challenges related to acculturation, cultural identity, and mental health, similar to those encountered by Mexican-American or Latino adolescents. However, it is crucial to underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity in addressing these challenges. Culturally informed approaches to mental health care are imperative, given the diverse backgrounds within the Latinx community. Recognizing the significance of cultural identity, fostering open dialogues, and providing accessible resources are key elements in effectively addressing mental health challenges and promoting the well-being of Latinx adolescents, particularly those of Ecuadorian descent within the relatively small demographic present in America.

In response, both machismo and marianismo have exerted adverse effects on the gender development of Latino boys and girls, manifesting in behavioral imbalances due to unrealistic expectations, influencing mental health outcomes, stifling emotional expression, and concealing the role of gender expression in shaping identity and relationships. These elements play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and well-being of Ecuadorian adolescents, along with other Latino groups that currently lack sufficient research representation within their demographic.

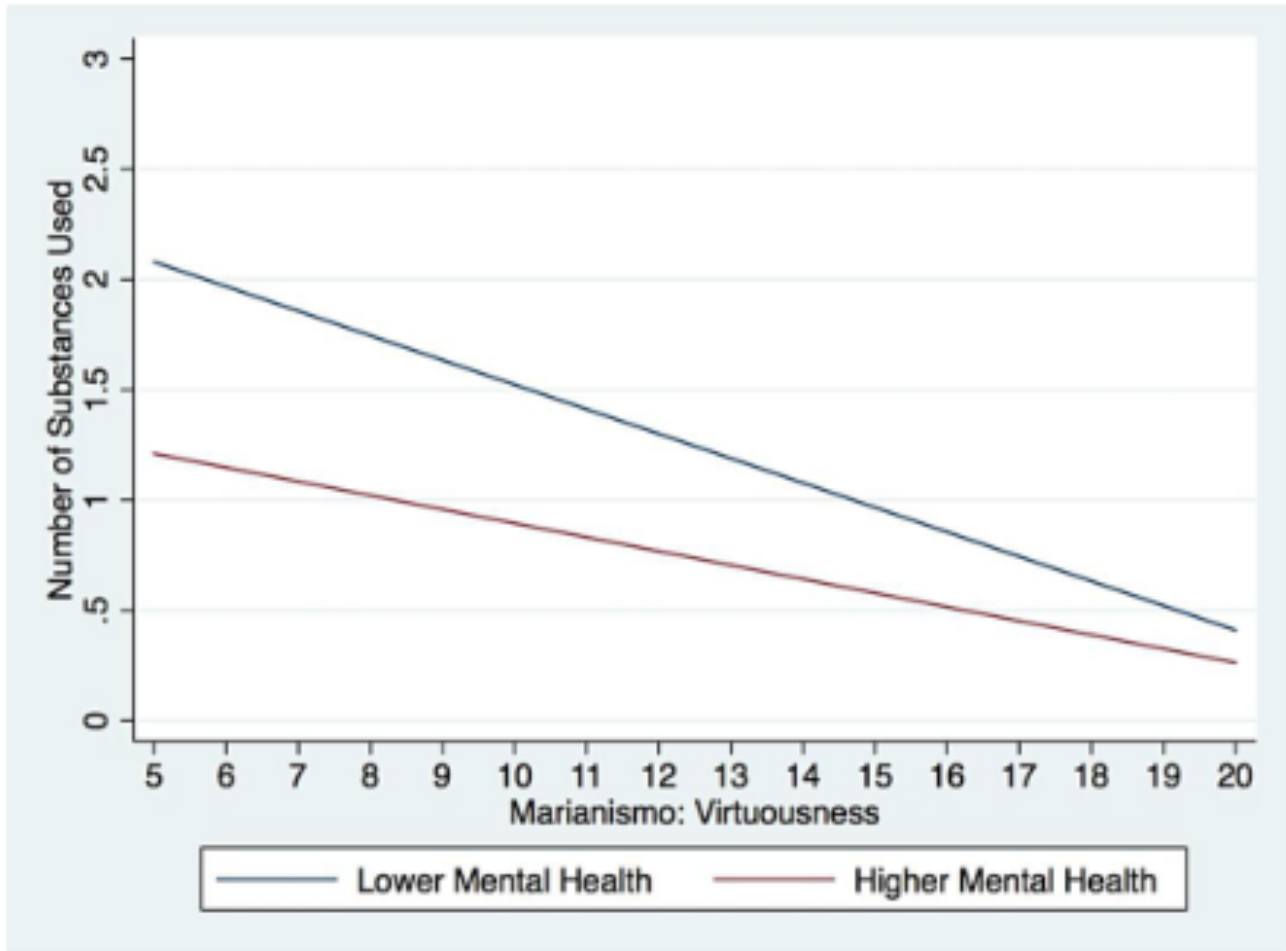


Figure 3: Moderating Effect of mental health on the relationship between the virtuous/chaste marianismo pillar and lifetime number of substances used (Sanchez, 2017).

## *Interview*

The adverse impact of unrealistic male expectations on the behavioral development of young boys poses significant challenges to the growth and maturation of young male Latinos, showcasing direct correlations to substance abuse and an early pathway to fatherhood through premature engagement in sexual behaviors (Hernandez et al., 2020). In a bid to delve deeper into this assertion on a personal level, I conducted an interview with a nineteen-year-old Ecuadorian individual residing in the tristate area, pursuing his studies. During the course of this interview, the participant was probed about his experiences growing up in an Ecuadorian household. Unaware of the interview's specific focus, the participant spontaneously shared his upbringing, highlighting his routine of engaging in sports with his father and returning home to meals prepared by his mother and sisters. The participant remarked, "They never allowed me to participate." While the participant did not explicitly articulate the connection between gender and expectations in his household, the segregation between those expected to participate in the

kitchen and those tasked with expressing masculinity through sports indicates a set of expectations ingrained in his childhood. Furthermore, the interviewee disclosed that he was expected to contribute to the family's income by the age of fourteen. "My father always told me that I needed to help around the house, and while my sisters cooked and cleaned, I needed to work." This shows one of the expectations that male Hispanic parental figures impose on their sons - the responsibility to support the family financially. This unrealistic expectation, placed on a nineteen-year-old, has led to mental exhaustion inappropriate for a minor, shown in elevated levels of stress resulting from shouldering the financial responsibility for one's family. Toward the end of the interview, he reflected on how this social expectation in his household significantly weighs on his shoulders. "It is my job to take care of my family," the nineteen-year-old asserted. His experience serves as a first-hand example of how unrealistic and sexist expectations placed on young Ecuadorians impact their social performance, influencing their behavior and mental health.

## *Discussion*

The interviewee's life experiences are not the only pictures painted on the map. This is because machismo emphasizes a specific standard of behaviors commonly expected of men in Latin American countries (Hernandez et al, 2020). These expectations of Ecuadorian adolescent boys and the roles they play in the households are due to the gender socialization that is prevalent in Ecuadorian families. In previous studies, data has suggested that considerable variation exists among Latino/a families in how children are socialized regarding gender and sexuality which explains how the hyper masculine behavior is what leads to the unrealistic expectations as aforementioned (Rafaelli and Ontai, 2004). By arguing that treatment between young Latinas and Latinos is not the same, one can deduce that the expectations placed on either sex were just as different as seen in the interviewees case. It's important to note that these experiences are generalized for Latino countries and Ecuadorian adolescents residing there, however acculturation and the need to fit in causes a stronger emphasis on machismo which occurs among Ecuadorian families here in the United States. Many Ecuadorian families that reside here in the United States consist of parents who are uncultured, in the American way of life with children who are trying to become cultured for the sake of acceptance by their peers. This is one of the main reasons why children in Ecuadorian families may find themselves caught between the more traditional values that their parents encourage at home and the more individualistic American values they are exposed to through school and the media (Denis et al,2010). This suggests that immigrant parents have this conception that upon arriving to the U.S their familial traditions and customs would be carried over to their new home, however once they arrive and settle in to the "Americanized" life they are faced with the struggle of trying to covent their kids from straying too far from the cultural expectations and values. This ultimately leads to the demand of expectations from these adolescents, especially Ecuadorian boys that are placed with the responsibility of being a strong male figure in charge of the house when the father isn't around which causes changes in the behavior through the need for maturation at a ripe age.

Further exploring how unrealistic, sexist expectations placed on young Ecuadorians prove to be detrimental to their development, the limitations of emotional expression suggests to be a causation of the extent of machismo they face. Notably, male adolescents are deprived from

their basic exploration of emotional intelligence due to the relationships fathers formulate with their sons in hispanic households. To name, research showcases the urgency this problem faces. For instance Wilson and Cifuentes demonstrated how “internalized identities aligned with parenting norms and expectations are externalized through a father’s expression of masculinity in either a positive and nurturing fashion or a negative and controlling manner.” (Wilson and Cifuentes,2020). This showcases that male parental figures tend to minimize aspects like touch and words of affirmation on their sons due to the need for control. At a first glance, this absence of affection might seem unimportant; however, researchers have argued that it is one of the main causative factors of the restrictive personalities that male adolescents create. Similar to the lack of affection, the poor relationship between father and son is also identified through the use of alcohol. Research shows that Latino men tend to have an identity crisis when faced with the role of fatherhood. They turn to drinking which is an example of the negative effects of machismo (Wilson and Cifuentes, 2020). This cycle has been repeated for generations which causes the poor development of emotional expression since the way to cope with problems is to either turn to consumption of substances or express concern for others in a controlling manner. This causes these young boys to be less prompt to engage in open conversations about their emotions and deprive themselves of formulating relationships in their social life. This demonstrates to be a problem because social interaction is one of the main skills for survival and development in life. Therefore, as it has been expressed, the absence of emotional father-son relationships is a distinguishing and important catalyst for the poor sentimental development of young Ecuadorians.

## *Conclusion*

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This research has delved into the intricate interplay of cultural factors, particularly the influence of machismo, on the mental health of Ecuadorian adolescents in the U.S. The journey of Ecuadorian families to the United States emerges as a transformative experience for adolescents, one marked by both challenges and strengths stemming from the process of cultural adaptation. Through an exploration of the literature and analysis of machismo's manifestation, it becomes evident that addressing the mental health disparities among this demographic necessitates a nuanced understanding of their unique cultural context. The remarkable resilience and adaptability displayed by many Ecuadorian adolescents amid the challenges of migration underscore the importance of recognizing their strengths in addition to addressing vulnerabilities. The blending of cultural influences contributes to a rich and diverse tapestry of experiences, highlighting the need for mental health interventions that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the complexities of identity formation. By emphasizing the importance of considering cultural factors, this discussion underscores the need for tailored interventions that go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. The unique challenges faced by Ecuadorian adolescents, shaped by the enduring impact of machismo and marianismo, require targeted strategies for support and resilience-building. It is imperative to communicate the implications of this research to mental health practitioners and society at large. By shedding light on the distinctive challenges faced by Ecuadorian adolescents due to machismo, this research brief aims to instigate a push toward resolving cultural differences and fostering a more inclusive and understanding approach to mental health interventions. Through increased awareness and sensitivity, it is hoped that practitioners and policymakers will actively contribute to creating a supportive environment that nurtures the well-being of Ecuadorian adolescents and, by extension, other immigrant populations facing similar challenges.



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