In general and across time, women have been kept out of the limelight and been assigned powerless roles rendering them dependent on the patriarchal state and its laws. Exceptions have, however, challenged the role of victim, moving instead toward personal goals or to lead causes where they exhibit the abilities, intelligence and articulation skills they innately possess. This is the case of immigrant women, living and working in the U.S., documented or not, who have experienced but have not accepted victimization and manipulation, instead advocating and organizing for immigrant and worker rights.

Immigration is among the most difficult acts of change that an individual can undertake. Relocating to another area of the world with different values, language, and cultural systems—leaving one’s native place, community and family can be emotionally charged. However, when migration occurs within one’s own cultural space, and one is criminalized for doing so, the experience can be traumatic. This is the case for Mexican and Central Americans migrating to the U.S.

A quick history lesson shows that the American continent was and still is an indigenous space in which its descendants live, create community, travel and hold memory, despite borders and walls, albeit under the shadow of globalization. As these voices continue to create history they tell their stories, those of manipulation, exploitation for profit, abuse and deportation. Immigrants of both genders make their voices heard as subalterns, advocates and activists. A running theme in such stories is their natural right to traverse the land of their ancestors, to work, provide for their families and continue traditions and culture within the space of the Americas. But the space has been controlled for some time by the non-indigenous mandate of Manifest Destiny.

Estamos en la lucha: Immigrant women light the fires of resistance is a smooth reading, absorbing, dynamic little tome that gives the reader a quick snapshot of the power of immigrant women in the U.S. from a socialist feminist perspective. Author Christina López, a Chicana activist from Arizona, acknowledges the power of all women, not only those of indigenous ancestry but all who work in the sweatshops, factories, in service positions—Mexicanas, Filipinas, Africans. López unites various struggles against exploitation and injustice into a feminist front. As big business rarely discriminates in its quest for profit, unity is essential. She discusses a variety of topics that form the basis of the immigrant experience, linking these to other threads, weaving for the reader the vast scenario of globalization, or capitalism at a faster speed. The clear message here is the agenda that immigrant women in the U.S. have undertaken and the leadership that they have assumed in advocating and organizing for immigrant and worker rights despite obstacles posed by business and government.

López exposes cases of intimidation, criminalization of the immigrant status, the terror induced by the practice of racial profiling, and the denial of social assistance programs that reduce many women and their families to levels of poverty. She describes the conditions of sweatshops where women often work over 12 hours a day and retaliations against them when efforts are made to organize, including threats of deportation, immigration raids and arrests that tear families apart. Separation exposes family members to emotional and potential physical and sexual abuse, incarceration, the removal of children to foster homes, and deportations. This scenario extends to all of us Mexican looking individuals, residents or citizens. In Arizona some individuals prefer to stay home at night for fear of being stopped by the police. “Even those with papers, we don’t go out at night at certain times...
There is also direct relationship between immigration, racial profiling, globalized big business and the manipulation of the food available to Americans from all walks of life.

Beside health risks posed by GM foods, the campesino is often forced to leave home and land to become part of the masses of unemployed and exploitable laborers in Mexican and American cities. This flight is connected to the flooding of the Mexican market with American GM corn and other products, and the imposition of GM corn planting on the campesino by the Mexican government and business. Such designs are destroying a traditional planting culture, and enticing the younger generations toward the NAFTA maquiladoras and migration to the U.S. (Fitting, 2011). Upon closer examination the issue is not a flood of immigrants into the U.S. that take away jobs from Americans; it is the economic system in place that cares neither for the citizen nor the immigrant. When businesses downsize and outsource, profit, not worker citizenship status, color, gender or nationality is its main concern. This is a central issue for labor and immigrant rights activists.

The U.S. has a dynamic, yet suppressed, labor history. The 19th century witnessed union organizing in the textile mills of New England, where women organizers, although fewer in numbers than males, occupied central positions. Anne Burlak, the “Red Flame,” was one of many personalities who formed the backbone of a rising White American radicalism between World War I and II (Chomsky, 2008). Mary Harris, or “Mother Jones,” was a tireless labor leader known for organizing women and advocating on the behalf of children working in mills and mines, and union organizing for mine workers during the early decades of the 20th century. Luisa Moreno, a Guatemalan immigrant, organized her co-workers into a garment workers’ local union during the Depression in Spanish Harlem, New York City and actively encouraged women to become leaders and organizers. In the contemporary southwest, Dolores Huerta, active in organizing migrant workers in California, and Shirley Otero, land grants activist in Southern Colorado, instantly come to mind as leadership icons and powerful speakers with an ability to link causes and issues resulting in “aha” moments for the audience.

The women presented in López’ tome, Emiliana Aguilar Reynosa and Elvira Arellano, both immigrant rights activists, continue the tradition of organizing and advocacy without consideration of color, cultural orientation, and immigration status, reminding us that we are all in the same boat, and that business employs those that can be manipulated and shaped to their own purpose: profit! The support of immigrant women by labor locals, the publicizing of their circumstances through documentaries, e.g., Made in L.A. (Lopez, p. 10), and development of organizations such as Sweatshop Watch (p. 9), and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in northern California (p. 13) are parallel to the New Mexico Worker’s Center, founded by Somos Un Pueblo Unido. This is “the only community based and immigrant led organization actively committed to preparing immigrant leaders to promote worker and racial justice” (Somos Un Pueblo Unido, para 1).

Estamos en la lucha: Immigrant women light the fires of resistance is not an analytical, intellectual, academic treatise. This is not its purpose. Rather it is a primary piece that addresses and ties together complex areas underlined by globalization and its attack on the human rights of individuals, families and communities across the globe, in particular of immigrant and working women in the U.S. Lopez provides glimpses of women activists easily overshadowed by sensational, conservative mass media headlines. The many threads of thought that this little tome addresses makes it an excellent springboard for more in-depth reading by individuals and reading groups. It serves as a primer for consciousness raising and advocacy and organizing training. A thorough 35 page narrative, Lopez’ tome is clearly written and relatively jargon free, presenting a complex topic succinctly and capturing well a political consciousness that creates the solidarity described here. “In October 2011, thousands of immigrant workers in Alabama, with support from African American and white workers, held a wildcat, one-day strike over new xenophobic legislation” (López, p. 23).

Bio: Yoly Zentella, an independent scholar, clinician and faculty member focuses on the psychology of place and Chicano historical trauma. She has published on Northern New Mexican Hispano land loss in academic journals. Contact her at: yzentellnm@yahoo.com