

# Increasing Numbers of Qualified Mexican Women in the United States

Luis Calva\*

**I**n recent years, scholars have pointed out the importance of women's participation in skilled migration or the international mobility of the population with high

levels of schooling. They suggest that the same thing is happening with Mexico-United States migration: in 2010, highly skilled women were the majority of qualified Mexicans residing in the United States. The data indicate that, in absolute terms, more skilled women than men were living there (273 822 women vs. 256 175 men). Between 2000 and

---

\* Researcher at the National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt) Professorship Program, lecsiul@gmail.com.



Jose Manuel Ribeiro/Reuters

2010, the number of women grew 82.4 percent, almost 15 points above the growth of the male population.<sup>1</sup> However, although it is true that migration of people who have graduated with at least a bachelor's degree in their country of origin has increased, what some authors call "skilled migration,"<sup>2</sup> in the case of Mexico-U.S. migration it is not clear that the above data refer to the same phenomenon. This is because they are the result of analyzing qualified workers born in Mexico and residing in the United States, but this is not necessarily due to highly skilled migration: many of these individuals did not study or graduate in their country of origin.

Based on this observation, in this article I propose to rethink the phenomenon of the growing presence of qualified women immigrants in the United States, but identifying the migratory and educational processes they followed to get there.

An analysis of the Mexican population with higher education residing in the United States is often used to determine the size of Mexican skilled migration there.<sup>3</sup> Based on its volume, today more than half a million, this indicates that Mexico is in fifth place among the main countries of origin of qualified immigrants residing in the United States, behind only those from India, the Philippines, China, and South Korea. It is even said that in absolute numbers, Mexico is among the world's main countries that expel highly skilled labor. However, not all Mexican emigrants with high levels of schooling residing in the U.S. left their home country after concluding

Skilled migration implies that the individual has the qualifications at the time of migrating; otherwise, it would be unlikely that he/she would participate in these selective "dynamics and logics."

their studies; therefore, not all of them are part of the group of high-skilled Mexican emigrants.

For example, let us look at the case of Nancy, a Mexican woman who emigrated to the United States when she was only nine years old, continued her studies there, and despite being undocumented, managed to study business administration, graduating with honors in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Or, we have the case of Sergio, an undocumented immigrant recently featured in different U.S. media after passing the Bar in California. Born in 1977, before the age of two, he "emigrated illegally" with his family to the United States. He lived there until he was nine, when he was taken back to Mexico. At 17, he returned to California with his parents, where he continued his studies and graduated from Cal Northern School of Law.<sup>5</sup> Are these cases examples of highly skilled migration?

From the perspective used here, these are examples of processes in which an individual emigrates as a child and performs with high academic achievement in their destination country (as in Nancy's case), or more complex cases like Sergio's, which included at least three changes of country before concluding his bachelor's degree. What is not observable in these stories is migrants' being able to use their qualifications as a resource for getting a work visa when they go to the United

States from Mexico, since at that time they were not university graduates. It should be pointed out that, to understand this perspective better, the demographic definition of the words “migration,” “immigration,” “emigration,” “migrant,” “immigrant,” and “emigrant” must be taken into account. They refer to different moments or perspectives of place from which an individual’s movement is analyzed, one of whose consequences is the change of residence.

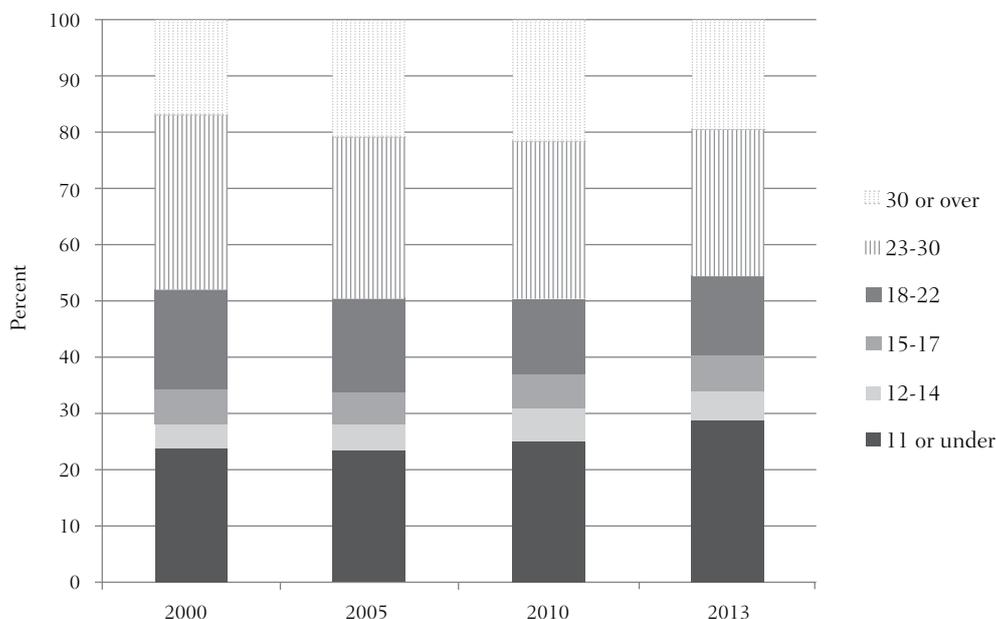
When we talk about migration, we are talking about movement or displacement; when talking about skilled migration, we are referring to the mobility of the skilled work force between countries. Also, as Lozano and Gandini point out, rigorously speaking, one of the most important contemporary characteristics of international migration is the split between skilled and unskilled migration since they are movements with different dynamics and logics.<sup>6</sup> Among them is the differential treatment given migrants based on selective immigration policies that limit the crossing of international borders of low-skilled migrants and favor that of highly qualified migrants. That is, as a process, skilled migration necessarily implies that the individual must have the qualifications at the time of migrating; otherwise, it would be unlikely that he/she would participate in these selective “dynamics and logics.” Based

on this, we can argue that Nancy’s and Sergio’s processes were completely outside the logic and dynamics that characterize highly skilled migration because they were not motivated by labor issues nor was there any possibility of requesting preferential visas for them as qualified workers.

So, the question is how many Mexicans with higher education have emigrated to the United States and stayed there. These estimates are often made based on data from the American Community Survey (ACS).<sup>7</sup> However, this survey does not offer information about the country where the interviewees obtained their bachelor’s degrees. This means that the data must be found using other variables like the duration of their stay in the United States and their ages. For a panorama of the female population born in Mexico with undergraduate educations or more, Graph 1 presents the percentage distribution of the age of arrival in different years of the twenty-first century.

Mexico is in fifth place among the main countries of origin of qualified immigrants residing in the United States, behind only those from India, the Philippines, China, and South Korea.

GRAPH 1  
 PERCENTAGE OF MEXICAN WOMEN WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES  
 OR HIGHER RESIDING IN THE UNITED STATES (BY AGE GROUP)



Source: Developed by the author using American Community Survey (2000, 2005, 2010, and 2013) data.

TABLE 1  
MEXICAN POPULATION WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES RESIDING  
IN THE UNITED STATES (BY SEX AND AGE GROUP)

Sex	Age on Arrival	Year			
		2000	2005	2010	2013
Women	11 or under	32 871	48 224	70 165	89 526
	12-14	6 368	9 728	17 086	17 606
	15-17	8 584	11 282	17 219	19 798
	18-22	24 959	35 488	37 961	44 605
	23-30	43 987	59 246	80 634	82 874
	30 or over	22 926	42 201	59 478	60 350
	Total	139 695	206 169	282 543	314 759
Men	11 or under	30 281	45 894	57 543	68 334
	12-14	8 245	12 040	12 585	18 017
	15-17	11 377	16 825	19 938	17 016
	18-22	28 916	43 635	39 215	41 676
	23-30	47 690	58 181	74 515	75 325
	30 or over	32 251	55 062	60 282	67 081
	Total	158 760	231 637	264 078	287 449

Source: Developed by the author using the American Community Survey (2000, 2005, 2010, and 2013) data.

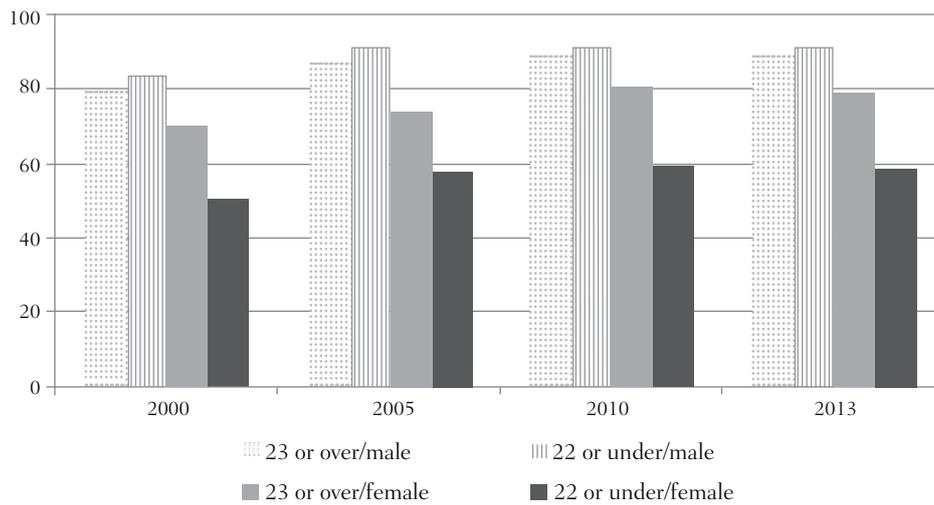
**In 2010, highly skilled women were the majority of qualified Mexicans residing in the United States. The data indicate that, in absolute terms, more skilled women than men were living there.**

The first thing that stands out is that in 2000, only 47.2 percent of women who arrived were 23 or older; that is, their arrival was probably after having finished their undergraduate studies. By 2013, contrary to what would be expected in a scenario of greater skilled migration from Mexico to the United States, this percentage had dropped to 45.5. That is, the role of Mexican little girls and female teens who emigrate, possibly with their families, and finish their education in the U.S., is increasing in importance, even if only slightly. We should underline that the 11-and-under group grew the most, rising from 23.5 percent in 2000 to 28.5 percent in 2013. Approximately one out of every four Mexican women with bachelor's educations residing in the United States completed her studies almost entirely in that country.

These little girls' migration has little to do with skilled migration if we associate the latter with the international mobility of "intellectuals," scientists, and bachelors in technology identified by their research work and the creation of advanced knowledge. The same thing would happen if we used a less restrictive definition that included persons who had received at least their first university degree in their country of origin or other workers like athletes, models, and actors, even if they had not achieved the same level of schooling. The difference is not in the quality or quantity of knowledge, but rather in the moment in which the individual possesses it, since—and I underline this—the definition of highly skilled migration takes into account the individuals who have that training before they move; and these little girls achieved their level of schooling after migrating.

According to ACS data, in 2000, 139 695 Mexican women with undergraduate university studies or higher were living in the United States, a number that had increased 125 percent by 2013. However, this rise can be explained more by looking at the number of women who arrived before the age

GRAPH 2  
 ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE MEXICAN POPULATION WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES RESIDING IN THE UNITED STATES (BY SEX AND AGE GROUP, 2000, 2005, 2010, AND 2013) (PERCENT)



Source: Developed by the author using American Community Survey (2000, 2005, 2010, and 2013) data.

of 23: 54.3 percent of the 2013 figure corresponds to this age group, which grew more with respect to the year 2000, increasing 136 percent. As already mentioned, this was due to the fact that the group of women who arrived by 11 or younger jumped from 32 871 to 89 526, a hike of 176 percent. This shows that, while it is true that skilled migration from Mexico to the United States has grown considerably in the first years of the twenty-first century, it does not by itself explain the increase in the population of Mexican women immigrants; the academic achievements of these little girls and female teens play an equally or even more important role.

The highly skilled male migrant population increased from 158 760 to 287 449 between 2000 and 2013. These figures show what other studies have demonstrated: men stopped being the majority of qualified Mexican immigrants in the United States. However, we have to underline that, in comparison with the female group, the main source of that increase in the stock of males continues to be skilled migration, since, while the 0-22 age group increased only 84 percent, the 23-or-over group increased 126 percent.

Finally, we should emphasize the role of this population group in the labor market, seeing whether or not it is employed. Given that the definition of skilled migration is closely linked to the labor market —part of its definition focuses on professional activity—, it is pertinent to ask if qualified Mexican women who emigrate to the United States join the

Since the definition of skilled migration is closely linked to the labor market, it is pertinent to ask if qualified Mexican women who emigrate to the U. S. join the work force or not.

work force or not. In order to do this, I calculated the percentage of the population working or seeking work, for each of the groups, by sex and age at arrival (22 years or under and 23 years or over) (see Graph 2).

The data show significant differences between the groups, specifically in the case of the women who we suppose were skilled migrants (those who arrived at the age of 23 or over). In 2000, their participation in the labor market was only 50.3 percent: one out of every two highly skilled women migrants was not working in the destination country at the time of the survey. In contrast, of the women educated in the destination country, the rate rose to 70 percent, and among men educated in their country of origin, to as much as 83.2 percent. In 2013, the differences between these groups persisted: the numbers increased to 58.9 percent among skilled women migrants, still very much below the 78.7 percent of those who arrived younger and were doing paid work.

What this article has shown is that the presence of highly educated men and women in destination countries is not only the result of skilled migration. In cases like that of Mex-

ican residents in the United States, little girls and boys and teens who emigrate with their families and finish the university there play a very important role, and their weight is even more important in the case of women. Finally, we should reflect on whether women migrants with university studies who do not join the work force of the destination country

should be considered skilled migration. But this must be resolved by defining the phenomenon as a function of this population's mobility, identifying whether the displacement occurs in a different framework than that of general migration. Only then will it make sense to talk about skilled migration of Mexican women to the United States. ■■■

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Lozano and Luciana Gandini, "La migración calificada de México a Estados Unidos: tendencias de la última década 2000-2010," *Coyuntura demográfica* no. 2, 2012, Sociedad Mexicana de Demografía.

<sup>2</sup> Enrique Oteiza, "Drenaje de cerebros. Marco histórico y conceptual," *REDES* vol. 3, no. 7, September 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Conapo, "La migración calificada de mexicanos a Estados Unidos," *Boletín de migración internacional* no. 22 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> "De vuelta a un mundo desconocido. Testimonio de la deportación de una *dreamer*," videoconference with Nancy Landa, organized by the master's program in population studies at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte,

Tijuana campus, published Friday, September 6, 2013, <http://www.colef.mx/evento/de-vuelta-un-mundo-desconocido-testimonio-de-la-deportacion-de-una-dreamer/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Milenio*, "Inmigrante, ahora abogado quiere inspirar a otros en EU," November 9, 2014 (Mexico City), [http://www.milenio.com/internacional/Inmigrante\\_abogado\\_EU-licencia\\_abogado\\_EU\\_inmigrante-inmigrante\\_ilegal\\_abogado\\_EU\\_0\\_406159575.html](http://www.milenio.com/internacional/Inmigrante_abogado_EU-licencia_abogado_EU_inmigrante-inmigrante_ilegal_abogado_EU_0_406159575.html).

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Lozano y Luciana Gandini, "Migración calificada y desarrollo humano en América Latina y el Caribe," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* vol. 73, no. 4, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).