

U.S.-Mexico Relations

Women Who Wait for their Migrant Husbands

The phenomenon of migration of Mexicans to the United States can be analyzed from many view-points; it has important political and economic implications for both countries. It deserves detailed analysis on demographic movement in this country, and respect for the rights of undocumented workers in U.S. legislation, to mention just two of the many aspects of this polemical theme, which *Voices* has already discussed on various occasions. Here we present an analysis by anthropologist Consuelo Díaz, who examines the situation of women who stay at home waiting for their men to return from a dream journey which for many becomes a nightmare. This wait by the women is far from being a passive act, as it involves assuming new unavoidable responsibilities in the struggle for their family's survival.

Much has been said and written about the migration of Mexicans to the United States, its causes and effects on the community of origin, on the condition of undocumented workers, the dangers they face in crossing the border and the life they lead in Mexico's neighbor to the north.¹ This phenomenon has been a source of concern for social scientists, politicians and humanitarian associations. Everyone tries to find an explanation for the exodus, relating it to economic characteristics of the agrarian sector, demographic growth and the dependence of Mexico on other countries or the effect of certain legislation and the absence of political will to achieve a more balanced redistribution of the population with better living conditions.

The difference of perspectives in the analysis of migration has provoked heated discussion above all because the questions that have

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guided research have sought different objectives. The discussion has continued up until now and hopefully, in the near future, an integrated vision of the phenomenon will be achieved. Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this article to discuss conceptual problems, but rather to provide information on one aspect, which although it has not received much attention in the literature, does not cease to be of importance. This refers to the situa-

tion of persons who remain waiting for those who have left, especially women.

The object of this study - carried out during 1987 and 1988 in Los Altos of Jalisco, a region of great migratory movement - was to analyze the role of migration within the process of social reproduction of the family. Information on and observation of daily life during field work take us necessarily to the migrant's family.

The family is the main protagonist of the wait, the recipient of economic benefits, but also of the consequences of absence.

1. J. Bustamante (1970, 1985, 1987), L. Arizpe (1972, 1976, 1985), W. Cornelius (1970, 1985, 1987) and a very long list of Mexican and foreign researchers who have dedicated themselves to the study of this population movement.

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Women and Migration

Given that migration to the United States, despite the growing number of women migrants over the last several years, is still a phenomenon in which men predominate, it is the head of the family who traditionally leaves in search of a supplement to his income. Due to this, migrant families have suffered a reorganization that affects their very core in which the woman remains as head of the family. From the moment that the husband decides to go north, the wife has to assume total responsibility for the family. From even before the husband's departure, she fulfills an important role as mediator between friends and relatives to put together money, to make contacts for the husband in the north, to search for possible lodging and to begin to think of the family's future survival.

Most women in Jalostotitlán, a town located in the heart of the region of Los Altos, have assumed that the departure of men is something natural. Ever since they were young, they saw their fathers and brothers leave, so it does not seem strange to them that their husbands take the same path. It is as if a part of their life cycle has not been completed until the departure of their spouse. Afterwards, nothing remains but to wait... and to survive...

The social sphere in which they live also plays an important role and makes these women assume absence and responsibility as a part of daily life, as something obligatory. The community and family pressure them to fulfill the role with which they have been marked by tradition, under the assumption that it will bring about an improvement in the well-being of everyone.

In most cases, the economic benefit expected from the migration takes up to four months to present itself, since the migrant's process of



Artwork by Rini Templeton. Reproduction by Alejandra Novoa

searching for a stable job and lodging in the United States takes time. Meanwhile, his family survives thanks to the help of in-laws and other relatives, and to the savings that were left in the town.

With or without help, in the short term the wife of the traveller has to search for a job to continue maintaining the family. Nevertheless, for many of them, the job cannot be full-time because it would be a source of criticism on the part of the husband's family and of the community in general, given that in the Mexican provinces, working wives are looked upon with disapproval. It is for this reason that in Jalostotitlán the women whose husbands are in the north say they only work at home, when in reality, in addition to domestic work, they work as seamstresses doing piecework for clothing factories in the neighboring municipality of San Miguel el Alto. This "work at home" consists basically of embroidering and doing *deshilado* (drawing threads from cloth to form designs) for undershirts for newborns, and for the necks and bodices of girls' dresses. The women receive narrow strips of cut cloth of different sizes so that they may embroider them with a certain design. For each portion of the dress, they receive between 500 and one thousand pesos. On a weekly basis, they come to earn between ten

and fifteen thousand pesos. (One dollar is currently slightly less than 3,000 pesos).

According to statements of women interviewed, sewing is not a formal job in spite of the time and wear and tear on the eyes that it implies, since they do it in their "spare time". This work is generally done in the afternoon; in the vestibules and through the door frames of houses, numerous groups of women can be seen doing *deshilado* work and embroidering. Young daughters help them do the *deshilado* and they receive 100 pesos for each piece.

Migration goes beyond the sphere of the family and goes deeper, affecting other areas of society

Work Not Admitted

In this way, the *deshilado* work serves as an economic complement for a good number of women, in spite of the fact that they do not consider it as work. We may observe, for example, that 76% of women interviewed in a

ACTIVITY OF MIGRANTS' WIVES

ACTIVITY	WIVES	PERCENTAGE
Does not work	228	76.3
Housewife who works at home	39	13.0
Housewife	6	2.0
Domestic work	4	1.3
Personal services	3	1.0
Shoe-making	3	1.0
Teacher	3	1.0
Works at home with sewing machine	2	0.7
Restaurant	2	0.7
Housewife who helps husband	2	0.7
Day laborer	1	0.3
Employee	2	0.7
Secretary	2	0.3
Doctor	1	0.3
Other	2	0.7
TOTAL	300	100.0

Source: International Migration Survey by Consuelo Díaz, 1989.

poll responded that they did not work in any other activity outside the home and only 23.4% responded that they did. Of this last figure, 3% work in the area of services since they do cleaning in schools, factories and doctors' offices and some of them are waitresses. Another 7% work, also for piecework rates, in the clothing and shoe factories that have arisen in the locality over the last decade and 7.3% responded that they worked at home sewing but by machine. The rest work in agriculture, shops and in packing plants.

But in fact, the 76% of those who responded that they did not carry out any type of work can be seen to diminish considerably when, through participation in daily life and informal chats, it is discovered that they do indeed work at home making tablecloths, undershirts or dresses for which they are paid piece rates. Thus, the women of Los Altos are widely integrated into the informal work market through work at home. The absence of male manpower has facilitated this process, thus, migration goes beyond the sphere of the family and goes deeper, affecting other areas of society.

On the other hand, in addition to the job implied by being head of the family, the migrant's wife suffers dif-

ferent social sanctions when one fine day her husband ceases to send her dollars and does not return home. Abandonment implies, in the case of young women, the search for mechanisms that allow them to maintain their children, but in addition, these abandoned wives have to assume the sole responsibility for their

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children forever since, socially, she may not start her life over again with another man, because for everyone in the local community, she continues to be married. For mature women, it means assuming her failure as a wife before the family and the community, which has repercussions in her relationship with her children and relatives.

The migrant's decision not to return may provoke extremist attitudes. We know of the case of a woman whose husband went north and who left her with his family so they would care for her and maintain her as if she were their daughter. In exchange, she would do the domestic work, for which her in-laws put her to good use. When the husband ceased to send money and to maintain contact with her and the family, the latter sent her back to her house since they considered their obligation with her to have been terminated. The man had gone and had not wanted to return for some reason, surely because she was

AGE RANGE OF MIGRANTS' WIVES

AGE RANGE	WIVES	PERCENTAGE
Less than 20	253	84.3
21-25	12	4.0
26-30	8	2.7
31-35	9	3.0
36-40	7	2.3
41-45	3	1.0
46-50	3	1.0
51-55	1	0.3
56-60	3	1.0
61 and older	1	0.3
TOTAL	300	100.0

Source: International Migrant Survey by Consuelo Díaz, 1989.

not a good wife. In this way, the very environment justifies the irresponsibility of the man who abandons his family and places the blame on the woman.

Coming and Going

The women whose husbands return after a year of absence remain with them during one or two months after which they begin to prepare anew for the husband's departure. Many of them remain pregnant after the encounter, and pregnancy and birth again become her responsibility. Thus, pregnancies are cyclic, just as the migrations.

Single women are also affected by migration in their relationships with men. Speaking in economic terms and making a comparison with the market, the scarcity of young men has resulted in a demand for eligible women among young girls between 15 and 16 years of age. All of those who go beyond this age and who have not married are considered by society as *cotorritas* ("little parakeets") a term

OCCUPATIONAL POSITION OF MIGRANTS' WIVES		
POSITION	WIVES	PERCENTAGE
Work for a boss*	29	9.7
Work for an institution	4	1.3
Self-employed	30	10.0
Do not work	237	79.0
TOTAL	300	100.0
* Seamstresses		

Source: International Migrant Survey by Consuelo Díaz, 1989.

that is applied to spinsters and that means remaining in the town without being able to carry out any other activity beyond domestic work, with the hope that someone from outside eventually take her away from the town.

In this way, the cycle of waiting is reproduced in all ages and social conditions; the control that society in Los

Altos exercises on women has no age limit. Likewise, the young women who want to leave Jalostotitlán to study or work have no hope of achieving this, since they can never rely on their parents' permission; studying is a privilege for men and work is only whatever exists in the home and in town.

It is for this reason that in recent



From "Images of Women", by Rini Templeton. Reproduction by Alejandra Novoa



Home-worker. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina

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years, some young women have opted, just as men, for migration. Several of them have gone to the United States accompanying their fathers and brothers to help them in household chores and to serve them food. They form part of a new flow of family migration. Nevertheless, in spite of being out of the town, they continue functioning within the family sphere which reproduces the same values as the community of origin and does not allow them to leave the house alone nor to get a job on their own, and when some opportunity arises, they have to be accompanied

by a family member. Other women, the bravest, escape to the north alone to get work in canneries in Los Angeles, or as waitresses, since, as they themselves say, the risk is worth escaping from being locked up.

Another group of women also escapes, but to Guadalajara or León, Guanajuato, to work in domestic services or in prostitution.

As we see, the situation of women from Los Altos does not vary in many respects to those of other women from rural environments. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the region, where tradition and regionalism make it stand out from many other zones, have given way to the fact that the migratory phenomenon again underscores certain aspects of social control and protection from values of other societies. Few of the consequences of these aspects on the family and the woman in particular have been documented and analyzed, since for many, this situation is considered to be of little importance and is even regarded as natural in spite of

the fact that some of their consequences are obvious: mistreatment and abandonment of children, prostitution, exploitation in housework, socioeconomic immobility of women, depression, and suicides, among others.

The interpretation of the why of this situation in a specific region would require another type of discussion; what is important to emphasize, is the need to analyze and provide information on those aspects of daily life of the ones who remain behind that have been altered by migration over several decades, and the repercussions for the future.² ■

2. Other aspects of the phenomenon that have been little studied and that affect the family of migrants include the propagation of AIDS, the effects of handling pesticides and other poisonous substances on the health of migrants and their families, and those related to labor accidents that this population suffers in the north.