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Voces de mujeres: Migration, Family, & Identity through the Voices of Mexican Women

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Abstract

Women have been an imperative part of migration history for centuries. However, it was not until recently that scholars began studying them individually. Before then, women were either not considered at all or were only considered as association migrants alongside their male companions. This diminishes their experience and their agency at each step of the migration journey. It leaves their stories untold while also establishing a swayed narrative that primarily encompasses males. Oral history is an integral part of “Voces de mujeres” because it allows the reader to hear directly from women. Through oral history I explore the reasons that women migrate from Mexico to the United States and how it impacts their identity and family life. Their testimonies illuminate a range of emotions—exhaustion, love, fear, acceptance; at the center of it is the strength of family ties. I argue that family is at the heart of their migration trajectories; from beginning to end, it shapes their stories.

Keywords: migration, women, identity, oral history, family, United States, Mexico



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Introduction

Up until recently, migration histories primarily considered women as associational migrants (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001, p. 187).¹ They were secondary agents that were examined only as companions to male migrants instead of independently. While it is true that many women come to the United States with the intention of joining their husband or family, this overlooks their experience, agency, and silences their voices (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001, p. 190).² Their perspective is valuable even when they are migrating alongside their spouses or family members. It also neglects the women who chose to emigrate independently and therefore, fails to accurately portray their role in migration. This article uses oral history to explore reasons that women migrate to the United States and the impact that their migration has on their identity and family life. Through their voices different facets of migration are illuminated—exhaustion, tragedy, love, fear, identity, family, acceptance. The diversity of their experiences is undeniable and reinforces the need to study migration through a female lens and, more importantly, make their voices heard. Furthermore, I argue that family is at the heart of their migration trajectories; from beginning to end, it shapes their stories.

Literature Review

There are four central debates that have shaped the literature on migration over the last century. The first is the question of which social class migrates. The overwhelming consensus is that immigrants derive from the lower-middle sectors of society because the rich have little incentive to migrate.³ The second is the effect of migration on local economic development

¹ Cerrutti and Massey argue that gender has not figured prominently in either neoclassical theories or studies by economists of labor migration. See also: Brettell and Simon 1986; Kossoudji and Ranney 1984; Pedrazza 1991; women migrating for "family reasons" (Pessar 1984).

² In their analysis of the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), renowned migration demographers, Massey and Cerrutti, found that "women generally become involved after involvement by another (typically male) family member" (Cerrutti and Massey, 2001, p.190).

³ See: Portes and Rumbaut, 1990; Dinerman, 1982; López, 1986; Mines, 1981; and Roberts, 1982. There are researchers who have found the opposite to be true—that is, the landless are the most likely to migrate because it is their only alternative to starvation. For studies reflecting this perspective see: Reichert, 1979; Stuart and Kearney, 1981; Massey et al., 1987.



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within Mexico. Community studies, in general, agree that migration undermines local development because U.S. earnings are “spent overwhelmingly on current consumption, leaving little money for productive investment” (Durand & Massey, 1992, p. 25). Moreover, these studies consistently report that “U.S. remittances and savings are directed to a few nonproductive ends: family maintenance and health; the purchase, construction, or remodeling of homes; and the purchase of consumer goods” (Durand & Massey, 1992, p. 26).⁴ However, Jorge Durand and Douglass Massey (1992) argue that this conclusion “does not account adequately for the structural, life-cycle, and historical factors that operate to constrain individual patterns of spending and investment” (p. 28). They suggest instead that “structural circumstances where productive investments are likely to be met with success and during phases of the life cycle when current needs are at a minimum, spending for production is quite likely” (p. 28). The third is the number of undocumented immigrants entering the United States. Part of this debate centers around *how* researchers should calculate the number of undocumented peoples crossing the U.S. – Mexico border. Senior demographer at Pew Research Center, Jeffrey S. Passel, has been a key figure of this debate over the last 4 decades—devoting his career to developing a methodology that was less speculative and more concrete (Passel 2020).⁵ The last debate concerns the impact of different strategies employed by migrants while working in the United States.

Scholarship on U.S. – Mexico immigration can be traced back to the 1930s with the work of Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio. Gamio published two groundbreaking books, *Mexican Immigration to the United States* (1930) and *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* (1931). In his first book, he drew attention to the disparity between United States estimates of Mexican immigration and Mexican estimates. He contested the widely held view that by 1929 there were already over a million Mexicans living in the United States. Gamio argued that the U.S. Census data was skewed toward a higher Mexican population because it was taken in July during the peak of seasonal Mexican migration—if the census had been taken in the winter,

⁴ See: Dinerman, 1982; Gonzalez and Escobar, 1990; López, 1986; Reichert, 1981; Stuart and Kearney, 1981; Mines, 1984; and Fernandez, 1988.

⁵ See also: Passel and Cohn (2020).



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when migrants had returned to Mexico, the numbers would have been substantially lower. Paul Taylor, Gamio's contemporary in the United States, disagreed. Taylor examined marriage registrations, national census figures, and school statistics to determine that Mexican migration was largely permanent and the decline in winter remittances was not a result of the migrants returning to Mexico but, instead, a result of fewer job opportunities in the off-season that did not yield enough extra income to send home. The “numbers debate” is one of the most enduring debates in U.S. – Mexico immigration studies and it has never truly been resolved.

Gamio's second book, *The Mexican Immigrant*, is the earliest border-related oral history work, which includes fifty-seven autobiographical statements on the immigrant experiences of the 1910s and 1920s.⁶ The testimonies that make up *The Mexican Immigrant* are a result of Gamio's research from *Mexican Immigration*. The stories were too extensive to be included in one work but interesting enough to be published independently. *The Mexican Immigrant* provides readers the chance to understand the nature of immigrant life through the voices of immigrants themselves. Recurring themes are those of Mexicans with little education, the lack of organization within the immigration community, the insecurity of unrest in Mexico (interviews were conducted in the midst of the Mexican Revolution), and the feeling of helplessness in the new country. Many of these themes are timeless and are identifiable to readers throughout “Voces de Mujeres” as well.

Sociologists have dominated Mexican scholarship on borderlands and migration to the United States. In one of the chapters of *El ir y venir de los norteros*, sociologists Germán Vega Briones and Gustavo Lopez Castro (2016) discuss the porous U.S. – Mexico border and the driving forces behind undocumented and circular Mexican migration between 1965 and 1986. They argue that the United States allowed their southern border to be “porous”—and therefore facilitate undocumented and circular migration—because they were “lax” on their vigilance and security (p. 278). Briones and Castro (2016) analyze the profile of the typical Mexican migrant to show that he remained nearly unchanged in their 20-year period. The Mexican migrant was overwhelmingly male, married, originating from medium-sized cities and

⁶ Taylor also interviewed immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s as part of his research on Mexican workers in the United States.



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between 21 and 25 years old (p. 279).⁷ Most of the men who crossed over did so without their spouses or children; any children who joined them on their journey were those who would be working alongside them (p. 288).⁸

Furthermore, Briones and Castro posit that, in general, migrants who traveled to the United States for the first time between 1965 and 1986 were not going with the intention of establishing themselves there permanently. Migration was cyclical and followed the patterns previously created by the braceros. They state, “[W]orking abroad was not a strategy to maximize lifetime income as a result of permanent relocation, but a strategy to solve short-term local economic problems and improve their standard of living in Mexico” (Briones & Castro, 2016, p. 281). Briones and Castro’s emphasis on the causes of migration differs from eminent American scholars, Massey *et al.* who, instead, stress the changing social and organizational structures that support and encourage migration.

In his monograph, *Debates Contemporáneos sobre migración internacional*, Alejandro Canales (2016) encourages scholars to look past questions of *if* and *why* immigration has increased or decreased or what the best mechanisms are to control immigration and instead turn their attention toward “understanding the specificities of its dynamics and problems in contemporary society” (p.6). Additionally, he argues that, both academically and politically, conversations surrounding migration have been dominated by conservative visions of society and how migration fit into society’s transformations. Canales states that a clear example of this conservative tendency is the fact that several world forums over migration and development have taken place but it is the perspective of the First World nations that dominates the conversation and visions of the future. It is principally the destinations of modern migration that impose their interests and limit the possibilities of a world consensus on human, social,

⁷ Briones and Castro state that women are rarely discussed in their chapter because they were not the main actors during their time frame. They suggest this is because undocumented women were less likely to take the risk of a clandestine crossing into the United States. An increase in female migration took place post-1986 when women were able to cross through family chain migration, made possible by the IRCA.

⁸ This changed post-1986 when the Reagan amnesty ignited a shift in migration patterns. The amnesty facilitated family migration, which also meant an increase in the women who were choosing to migrate. It also encouraged longer stays in the United States and was no longer predominately focused on rural labor sectors (Briones and Castro, 288).



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labor, and political rights for immigrants (Canales, 2016, p.6). Moreover, conservative scholars study migration with methodologies that no longer make sense for contemporary society. Canales asserts that conservatives are studying a society that has ceased to exist and, as a result, are incapable of understanding modern issues facing migrants and international migration. Canales does not single out any specific scholars—making it difficult to assess the conservative methodologies he is referencing. Nevertheless, he is right to call for world forums (and studies) that value the voices and ideas of the sending communities. Immigration issues—particularly with countries seeking to restrict immigration, like the United States—will not be resolved without addressing the root of why certain countries, like Mexico, are losing thousands of citizens a year to their northern neighbor.

Mexican American historian George I. Sánchez (1940) was an influential scholar and activist who fought for equal educational opportunities for Mexican American students. His best-known work is *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans*, published in 1940. Sanchez argues that New Mexicans—what he defines as the Spanish-speaking population and descendants of Spanish colonials—are the “forgotten people” (in the 1930s) and have been politically and economically victimized, poorly educated, and geographically and culturally isolated. Essentially, New Mexicans are “strangers in their own home” (p. 28). They have been overlooked and had their voices suppressed. While the Mexican Americans of Sánchez’s study are from a different generation, one will find in “Voces de Mujeres” that the feeling of being a stranger in one’s own home among immigrants is all too common. This feeling is applicable on both sides of the border—depending upon their age at arrival in the United States; interviewees described feeling like a stranger in the United States and/or Mexico. Sánchez identified these nuances long before other scholars acknowledged them with any sort of importance. As a Mexican American himself, Sánchez had a personal stake in making the voices of these forgotten and victimized people heard.

Massey has published numerous works on international migration, education, race, discrimination and Latin America, especially Mexico. Although he is an American scholar, Massey’s long-time collaborator is Peruvian-Mexican anthropologist, Jorge Durand, which has kept him intricately connected to the Mexican perspective in his scholarship. Mexican scholars



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often cite him as an authority figure on immigration studies. Together Massey and Durand have published over 40 books, articles, and book chapters. One of their most significant undertakings was the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), which was created in 1982 to develop a deeper understanding of the complex process of Mexican immigration to the United States. It is a bi-national research effort organized by Massey (Princeton University) and Durand (University of Guadalajara). The MMP's main focus has been on compiling social and economic information on U.S. – Mexican migration and making it available to the public free of charge for educational purposes (Mexican Migration Project). Their database has enabled researchers to “track patterns and processes of contemporary Mexican immigration to the United States” (Mexican Migration Project). From 1982 through 2018 they have interviewed 27,274 households in Mexico and 1,057 in the United States—totally 1,388,216 interviewees (Mexican Migration Project). Furthermore, the MMP allows researchers to supplement anecdotal data with empirical data that is reliable despite transitory, circular and clandestine nature of immigration (Durand & Massey, 2004, p.4).

Methodology

My research derives from the lived experience of migrants, making oral history a key component of this study. For much of the twentieth and twenty-first century, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and political scientists have driven the scholarship of migration, making a strong historical perspective, such as mine, long overdue (Overmyer-Velázquez, 2011, xxvi). More specifically, there are few histories of twenty-first century Mexico that have examined the first-hand personal experiences of migrants because immigration is often studied through a lens of political legislation, government regulations and economics. While these perspectives are important, they fail to provide an understanding of the personal impact of immigration on ordinary Mexicans abroad and at home. Thus, I champion the voices of those who have lived through policy changes and, for traditional migrants, risked their lives to be in the United States.

In order to gather the necessary data, I spent ample time in Dallas- Fort Worth to build relationships in the community and conduct interviews. These various connections offer a



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snowball sampling, or chain-referral sampling, a non-probability sampling where enrolled subjects assist in recommending friends or family members to participate in the study. However, even with this technique, I struggled finding people who were willing to speak with me—a stranger for all intents and purposes. My field research in Dallas – Fort Worth began in January 2017, immediately following the 2016 United States presidential election. The political climate was hostile toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike and people did not feel comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives for fear of their safety. Those who were undocumented wondered if I had ulterior motives that could lead to their detention and deportation. Their legal status was only of interest to me insofar as it shaped their migration experience but it was difficult to express this to people who were closed off. It was evident that the political context was a deterrent for those I wanted to interview. My aim was to always be open and transparent about my research interests in order build trust between myself and the informants. However, gaining their trust turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated.

I emailed scores of Mexican clubs and organizations, passed out flyers, and after nearly two months, I got *one* lead. I received this lead shortly after reconnecting with a family friend, Diana Hernández, who works with a sizeable Mexican population in Dallas – Fort Worth. Both leads finally got the snowball sampling rolling. Diana, in particular, was integral in connecting me with Mexican immigrants. She shared the premise of my study with her clients, passed along my flyer, and vouched for my benign intentions. Their trust in her, allowed them to trust in me and open up about their life stories. Once this trust was established, their stories came pouring out. It never felt like they were holding back in their testimonies. They were open to answering my questions in detail and elaborating beyond the initial questions as well. It is undeniable that getting people to interview is complicated and taxing but it is a necessary component of scholarship that aims to humanize immigration.

In the sampling of thirty-five interviewees, twenty-one were women. The interviews I conducted inquired about migrants' lives in Mexico, process of migrating, experiences in the immediate aftermath of migration, kin networks in Mexico and the U.S., work in the borderlands, gender roles in the workplace and at home, biculturalism, bilingualism, family dynamics and transitions to life in a new country.



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Results: Types of Migration

I identified three categories of female immigration to Dallas – Fort Worth: 1) independent migration where the woman travels alone; 2) associational migration where the woman is either joining or traveling with her spouse or partner; and 3) childhood migration where the woman entered the country as a child with her family. Of the twenty-one women from my study 28.57% were associational migrants, 33.33% were independent migrants, and 38.10% were childhood migrants. In this article I focus on associational and independent migrants.

I found a correlation between age at the time of arrival and the type of migration. All but one of the women who were associational migrants, meeting their spouse or partner in the United States, were in their early 20s or 30s when they crossed the border. Independent migrants were in their late teenage years, between the ages of 16 to 20, with two exceptions who were 24 and 28 years old. The women who arrived independently, like most of the migrants in this study, typically had family in the United States who would make the transition smoother. All of them expressed the desire to make a better life for themselves in the United States. Another common sentiment was their want, or need, to be financially independent from their parents.

Eithne Luibhéid and Robert Buffington (2011) examine the connections between gender, sexuality, and Mexican migration in their chapter in *Beyond La Frontera*. They argue that scholars tend to focus on economic and political forces that drive Mexicans to migrate without appreciating the central role that gender and sexuality can play in “the decision to migrate, the lives migrants lead, their work experiences, the government policies that seek to regulate them, and the anti-immigrant sentiments that shape those policies” (p.204). Luibhéid and Buffington (2011) stress that by failing to consider how gender and sexuality impact migration, one “impoverishes our understanding of the lived experiences of migrants, the discourses that circulate around them and shape those experiences, the disciplinary regimes that structure their work, and the binational state policies and practices that seek to categorize and regulate their lives” (p.205).



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Bertha, 35, serves as an example of sexually charged migration. She shared that her motivation for leaving Mexico and moving to the United States was to escape her father and grandfather, both of whom were sexually abusing her. She was sixteen when she met her boyfriend, now husband, confided in him, and came up with the plan to leave Mexico and start a new life. They chose Dallas because her husband's brother was already living there and said he could help them get situated with jobs and a place to live. Despite the struggles of moving to the United States without family, Bertha felt protected by her husband and with the peace of mind knowing her father and grandfather were thousands of miles away.

It should be noted that while none of the women in my study discussed being raped or sexually assaulted during or after their migration journey, it is a real risk for many undocumented females crossing the border. Perhaps they were a few of the lucky ones who did not suffer this fate, or perhaps they did not want to relive their trauma by sharing that experience. Regardless, every year countless migrant women and girls are victims of reprehensible sexual assaults that are often unreported, uninvestigated, and unprosecuted (Fernandez 2019). In 2014 three immigrant women were picked up by Border Patrol agent Esteban Manzanares. The women surrendered themselves to Manzanares but instead of taking them in for processing, he drove them to an isolated, wooded area and violently raped a 14-year-old girl and brutally attacked the other two women—slashing their wrists and leaving them to bleed to death. All three women survived and filed a civil suit, however, Manzanares committed suicide before he could be taken in and charged with a crime. For many undocumented women, crossing the border means paying the price with their body—rape, abuse, forced prostitution. These often happen at the hands of their smugglers but also at the hands of Border Patrol agents and Customs officers (Fernandez 2018). It is a gross abuse of authority and horrifying reality that should not be downplayed or silenced.

Ruba Salih (2000), a Palestinian scholar, has published groundbreaking work on gender and migration in the Middle East, Europe and beyond. Her monograph, *Gender in Transnationalism*, examines the immigration of Moroccans to a region around Bologna, Italy and emphasizes transnationalism, modernity, and gender. The use of a gendered lens to study immigration is pivotal because it reveals the diversity of the female experience. Salih argues



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that for some women, emigrating is an active decision made on their own accord. They choose to do so to advance their education, pursue employment opportunities, etc. Other women, however, have less control over their emigration and are following their husbands. I have drawn similar arguments in “Voces de Mujeres,” building on Salih’s vein of thought.

Another renowned scholar, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), specializes in gendered migration and has published numerous works examining how gender informs one’s migration process. She emphasizes the idea that “contrary to the orthodox view of migration, Mexican immigrants do not always pursue migration as part of a unified household strategy” (p.53). Hondagneu-Sotelo argues that those who consider migration solely through the household model either “ignore women’s place in these social relations altogether or erroneously assume that women are simply inserted into their male kin’s networks and therefore automatically benefit from men’s social resources and expertise” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, p.55). This is typical in family stage migration, says Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992), because patriarchal gender relations are embedded in normative practice and expectations exist that allow men, and simultaneously deny women, the authority and resources necessary to migrate independently (p. 394). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) concludes,

Two factors distinguish them [women] from the men: the direct migration assistance they received came principally from other migrant women, further substantiating the significance of migrant women’s networks; and most of the single women came from weakly bounded families that provided little economic support and lacked patriarchal rules of authority (p. 87).

Testimonies from my case study support Hondagneu-Sotelo’s conclusion, particularly regarding receiving little economic support from their families in Mexico and needing to find a way to support themselves. The great majority of women in my study who migrated individually were joining an established kinship network in the United States but did so without the financial assistance of family in Mexico. Those who migrated with their family unit intact, or were uniting their family through their migration, often had a blended kinship network from their family and their spouse’s family. Latin American countries, including Mexico, share



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strong commonalities in the way their family networks function. It has been called “Familismo,” “or a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their families (nuclear and extended), and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family (Sabogal et al., 1987)” (De Vos, 2014, p. 113). Bron B. Ingoldsby (1991), a Family Science scholar, explains that “familismo” or “familism” places family interests ahead of individual interests and development (p. 57). This includes kin members, such as godparents, who are not necessarily blood relatives. They often live in close proximity to one another, if not in the same household. Ingoldsby (1991) states, “[i]t is common for adult children to supplement their parent’s income. In many ways, the Hispanic family helps and supports its members to a degree far beyond that found in individualistically oriented Anglo families” (p.57). This context helps one understand why family plays an integral role before, during, and after migration.

Hirma Carrillo, 49, grew up on the border in Nuevo Laredo and could not wait to grow up and move to the United States. She was constantly hearing from cousins, friends, and family who had made the journey before her and painted a picture of the United States as the promised land. Thus, when she turned 18, she moved to Dallas where her older siblings were settled. Hirma shared that when she arrived in the United States, she struggled with two issues: missing her parents and the language barrier. She could not do much about missing her parents, so she focused her efforts on bridging the language barrier by studying at the library on her spare time. Hirma taught herself English and can now easily communicate in both languages. Her life in the United States has not been as idealistic as she imagined but she is happy with the life she has made in Dallas.

Lorena moved to the United States on her own but her immediate family, including her parents, had already been in the U.S. for several years. There was a family history of migration that pushed her to eventually make the decision to follow in their footsteps. Her father crossed illegally, and her mom joined him years before Lorena decided to make the move herself. The more her family members trickled into the United States, the lonelier she felt while she remained in Mexico. At 28 Lorena finally decided that it was time for her to take a chance on improving her quality of life by moving to the U.S. She had been working in Mexico for over



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a decade and said, “[t]o improve the standard of life that one had over there [Mexico] is difficult, you have to work a lot and they don’t pay you fairly—you work a lot of hours and you don’t receive the money that you should receive.”⁹ More importantly, she longed for her family to be united again. Many of her family members were in the United States illegally and could not return to Mexico without risking the ability to successfully return to their lives in Dallas – Fort Worth.

Lorena and Hirma are examples of how women assert their independence by choosing to migrate alone despite the stigma that migration is a man’s endeavor. Not only did they migrate alone, but they did so without the financial assistance of a man or family members. They were responsible for financing their journey and establishing a plan to ensure stability once in the United States. Associational migration was long considered the traditional path of migration for female immigrants—i.e. women immigrated because they were following their spouse/partner, not because they had individual drives to pursue life in the United States. However, even in associational migration it is important to consider the women’s agency as distinct from their spouse. These women uprooted their lives to create something new in the United States and typically became a part of the workforce upon arrival. They were active at each step along the way and were not bystanders on their partner’s journey.

Rebecca, 61, came to the United States when she was 38 years old after her husband petitioned for her residency. They had been in a long-distance commuter marriage for years before she moved to Dallas. Her experience is very much in line with Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1992) arguments on family stage migration where “married women must accept their husbands’ migration decisions, remain chaste, and stay behind to care for the children and the daily operation of the domestic sphere” (p. 394). While her husband was away, Rebecca was raising their four children on her own in Guanajuato. When she first visited her husband in Dallas, she did not intend to stay—she planned on spending time with him, getting to know the

⁹ Lorena Meza interviewed by author on February 25, 2017 in Arlington, Texas. Page 2 of transcript. Quote translated by author.



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city and then returning to Mexico but ended up changing her mind. She and her husband reasoned there was no reason to stay long distance if it was not necessary. The transition was smooth since her husband already had a steady job and an apartment. When she arrived, he did not let her work because he wanted her to stay home and raise their children and believed his salary was sufficient. Here we see the patriarchal norms that existed prior to her migration flowing into her life in the United States.

Through our conversation, it was evident that Rebecca's relationship with her husband was deeply constrained by patriarchal norms rooted in Mexican machismo. He controlled the household and dictated decisions. She was very deliberate in her choice of words when she said that he did not *let her* find a job despite her wanting to work to contribute to the household. Rebecca was allowed to start working after their four children were grown and has been working ever since—roughly ten years. Her husband largely framed her experience and it was his patriarchal authority that influenced her migration. Nevertheless, Rebecca's story is not irrelevant merely because her husband regulated the household. Rebecca moved to be with her husband and had less freedom to impact the community outside of her household; she had little agency in the steps leading up to her migration and in the time that followed. Her testimony juxtaposed with the testimony of younger migrants shows how associational migration has changed over time and allowed women to be more involved in the aftermath of migration. Rebecca is the oldest woman in my case study and therefore her experience is coming from a place of traditional household and relationship gender norms. These norms have since gradually evolved with the feminization of migration and the women's rights movements, in general.¹⁰

These examples illustrate that women were able to exert their independence regardless of gender. For most, being a woman did not hinder their ability or desire to migrate, when, and to where, they wanted. Even the women who were associational migrants made the physical journey from Mexico to the United States without their husbands. I heard stories of

¹⁰ For a different perspective on women, gender and migration, see: Carolina Rosas's chapter in *Debates Contemporáneos sobre migración internacional*. She argues that instead of analyzing the feminization of migration, one should use migration as a lens to analyze the problems created by masculinities and gender inequalities that are constantly produced and reproduced in our societies.



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independence, decisiveness, and persistence. It further emphasized that women’s agency does not have to be linked to a male counterpart and illustrated why female migrants need to be studied individually. Their voices matter every step of the way.

The Immigrant Experience: why they come and how they get here?

The allure of the so-called “American dream” has inspired foreigners to leave their homelands behind in search of a better life. Public opinion surveys of U.S adults shows that the American Dream involves “hard work, financial security, career success and confidence that each new generation will be better off than the one before it” (Lopez *et al.*, 2018). According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, “[h]ispanics are significantly more likely than the general U.S. public to believe in core parts of the American Dream—that hard work will pay off and that each successive generation is better off than the one before it” (Lopez *et al.*, 2018).¹¹ With that said, Hispanics believe that achieving the American dream is difficult. The study found that only a little more than half (51%) of respondents believed they had achieved it so far, and nearly three-quarters (74%) said “achieving the dream today is hard for people like them” (Lopez *et al.*, 2018). Lopez *et al.* do not explain what respondents mean by “people like them” but, based on the context, my assumption is that they are referring to being first-generation immigrants who were raised without the resources, including education, available in the United States. The study goes on to report that belief in the American dream dwindles within second and third generation immigrants.¹² As immigrant roots grow distant, the American dream fades away.

Sociologist Vincent N. Parrillo (1991) points out, “[f]or most native-born Americans, America has been a gift long since given; for each new arrival, though, it has been fresh and dynamic- and not to be squandered. Each new immigrant has thus re-created the American Dream” (p. 133). This supports the evidence presented by Pew Research Center, demonstrating

¹¹ The study reports that in 2016 77% of Hispanics said that most people can get ahead with hard work versus 62% of the U.S. public. Additionally, 75% of Hispanics stated they expected their standard of living to be better than that of their parents and 72% expected their children to be better than themselves. In contrast, 56% of the U.S. public expected to be better off than their parents, and 46% expected their children to be better off than themselves.

¹² This is based on results from a Pew Research Center 2016 survey of Hispanic adults.



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that the further one becomes removed from the initial arrival, the less impacted one is by the ideals of the American Dream. Children born from immigrant parents may take the “gift” of America for granted but for a first-generation arrival, the allure of hope for a better life is powerful.

Parrillo (1991) examines the push-pull factors that have prompted millions of immigrants to choose the United States—typically family welfare emerges as a driving factor with the aim of escaping deprivation, harshness, limited options, or rigid social class lines of their homelands. Moreover, “[o]ften with the passage of money sent by a relative and guided by letters containing specific instructions, most immigrants knew beforehand their precise destination, how to get there, and where to find work” (p. 133).¹³ I saw this trend in my field research as well. Hirma, Gloria, and Rebecca, are just three of the aforementioned interviewees who were a part of this type of chain migration. They divulged that they were drawn to the United States, in part, because they already had family members living in the U.S. who had made the journey previously. Moving to a new country appeared less daunting when following in the footsteps of others who could ease the transition—such was the case for Rosario Rubio, 38, who came to the United States in 1998.

Rosario’s two older sisters were living in Fort Worth, Texas when she graduated from high school and was looking for a job. Her family lived in a small village in the mountains where finding a job was next to impossible—forcing her to work in a nearby city with extremely low pay. Rosario said, “In Mexico the salary is very bad. I studied for three years in a commerce academy and at 18 years old I could already work but they paid me 400 pesos bi-weekly. When I arrived here [Fort Worth] my first day of work I earned 500 pesos or \$50 in one day, while over there [Mexico] I earned 400 pesos in 15 days.”¹⁴ Her desk job in Mexico was, in her opinion, more prestigious than her job cleaning houses in the United States but the salaries were worlds apart. Cleaning houses was not an ideal job but the financial incentive for Rosario was

¹³ See also: Bodnar, 1985; Dyer, 1979; Vecoli, 1964.

¹⁴ Rosario Rubio interviewed by author in Arlington, Texas on February 17, 2017, page 1 in transcript.



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undeniable. The presence of family in the Fort Worth made her migration feasible but it was the possibility of earning more money that sold Rosario on the United States.

Others were prompted to move because of national events that made earning a living in Mexico challenging. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Mexico spiraled into a financial crisis. The government allowed its expenditures to run well ahead of its revenues. Economist Guillermo Ortiz (2012) explains, “In 1982, falling international oil prices, rising world interest rates, and massive capital outflows pushed external creditors to refuse to roll over Mexico’s short-term debt, leading to subsequent suspension of Mexican interest payments. Explosive inflationary and balance-of-payment difficulties ensued” (p. 5). Nora Lustig (1995) describes the dire situation, stating that inflation approached a triple-digit level several times during the 1980s, there was no new lending from foreign private sources, and “the domestic investors’ capital [was] leaving the country in leaps and bounds” (p. 46). The collapse of the Mexican economy and the devaluation of the peso affected the lives of millions of Mexican citizens. Those living in poverty increased during the 1980s. It is unsurprising, then, that Mexicans were searching for a solution to sustain themselves and their families.

Laura Gonzalez’s decision to migrate to the United States was directly influenced by the situation in Mexico. She arrived in the United States in 1979 because of the failing economy in Mexico. She expressed that she was struggling to make a living and needed to find a solution. Laura did not fantasize about the “American dream” and did not have illusions of becoming wildly successful—she stated, “I only thought about working to live...what one thinks about because, yes, that is really why we came because in Mexico there is not an enough way to survive.”¹⁵ Like Rosario, Laura had family members in the United States so she crossed illegally and joined them in Arlington, Texas. She did not have a plan for obtaining work but hoped that her family connections would guide her toward financial stability.

¹⁵ Laura Gonzalez interviewed by author in Arlington, Texas on February 18, 2017, page 3 in transcript.



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In this case study the primary reason for migrating, by and large, was in the hopes of securing a better life and finding work. It is difficult to assess whether the immigrants in this study were successful in securing a “better” life because it can be measured in countless ways. Thus, while I will not label them successes or failures, the interviewees themselves had opinions on the outcomes of their immigration. Laura, for example, was certain that she achieved her goal of a “better” life in the United States because the economic situation in Mexico was so dire at the time of her migration; she had no way to make a living. The fact that she found a job in the United States that allowed her to provide for herself and her family was considered a win in her eyes. Monica, on the other hand, would not categorize her experience as a success. The stress of adjusting to a new country was all encompassing and led to stress-induced seizures. She did not have a network of family to ease the transition and expressed that she never felt happiness in the United States until her children were born. Her children are the source of her happiness, but she has never stopped yearning for Mexico and her family. If it were not for her children having established lives in the United States, she stated that she would gladly go back to Mexico. The diverse experiences of Laura and Monica led to them drawing opposite conclusions about the outcome of their immigration.

The interviews conducted revealed that women in Dallas – Fort Worth were not migrating for specific jobs but instead for increased opportunities. The opportunities were most often the result of nepotism. It is also why there are Mexican communities that can be traced to specific geographic regions of the United States; they are often following in the footsteps of men and women from their hometowns who can help get them settled after their move. They especially rely on these connections for help finding a place to live and finding work, even if the jobs are, in their eyes, inferior to their jobs in Mexico.

Family Life

Family life is an integral part of the Hispanic culture and complicates the migration experience. In “Gender, Power, and Emigration from Mexico,” Jenna Nobles and Christopher McKelvey’s (2015) explore the question of how migration decisions are made and whether they are harmonious or contested. They look specifically at the decision-making power of women.



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Does the final migration decision align with the preference of the woman or the man? In what ways is the entire process gendered? The answers to these questions are not simple and neither is the analysis conducted by Nobles and McKelvey. When emigration is the final decision, the women who remain in Mexico are deeply impacted and affected by emigration. While there are positive aspects, such as remittances offering financial stability, it has its negative pitfalls as well. Nobles and McKelvey (2015) state,

Spouses of emigrants experience anxiety about the migrant's safety and the family's stability (Aguilar-Morales et al. 2008; Frank & Wildsmith 2005; Salgado de Snyder 1993). Migration also shifts the distribution of household and community labor (Andrews 2014; Arias 2013). In many families, men manage finances, participate in and negotiate interaction with community institutions, and make decisions about children's education (Garcia and Oliveira 2005; Gutmann 1996). As a result, nonmigrant spouses often take on new responsibilities while raising children and working to keep the family emotionally connected across borders (Arias 2013; Boehm 2008; Dreby 2010; Kanaiaupuni 2000b) (p.6).

These stressors are not limited to the women—children who have absent fathers are also impacted. Clearly, there are several factors that make the migration experience complex for all family members and not solely the person emigrating.

As Nobles and McKelvey explain, migration often results in the separation of the family unit temporarily, if not permanently. Parrillo (1991) states, “whether sojourners or permanent immigrants at the outset, commitment to their families and a sense of responsibility for their welfare usually served as the prime motivation for the struggles and hardships of immigrant life” (p. 133). There are several factors that influence the reasons for and duration of familial separation.

The migrants in my study had to work through long periods of separation and sometimes complex crossing situations. One of the more tragic testimonies was from Ana, 43, who was 8 years old when she and her family crossed into the United States. At the time, she had no idea they were moving to a new country—she just remembers the car accident. She was traveling in



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a truck with her four siblings, paternal grandmother, and her parents. There were other trucks that were also transporting immigrants. According to Ana, the driver of their truck was either drunk or under the influence of drugs. She described the following,

One of the trucks where my younger sister was in with my grandma—it flipped a couple of times and my grandma and my sister were thrown out of the truck and they died. The truck fell on—I don’t know which part of the truck fell on my sister’s head...she died instantly. My grandma was thrown but she died of internal injuries. We were somewhere in a different truck, but me and my sister, the next one from me, we didn’t receive any injuries like life threatening injuries, only just scratches. My dad his ribs was broken, my mom was pregnant with my brother and then my mom broke her back so she couldn’t move and she was almost due because he was born in January. He was born on this side; he was born in Eagle Pass. My dad, he was sent to the hospital in the Mexican side, we were split up. My sister, the one next from me, we were with foster parents on this side, on Eagle Pass and they white, they didn’t speak Spanish.¹⁶

She is unsure how long she and her sister were in foster care because she said she has done her best to block the memories and has never asked her mother because her mother has yet to forgive herself for what transpired. The next phase that Ana recalls is her family together in Dallas. They were all granted citizenship under the Reagan amnesty. Ana’s testimony is an example of how families can become separated even when the separation is not intentional as it was in Yolanda’s case. Her family planned on keeping the nuclear family intact by arriving together but misfortune resulted in a different trajectory. Separation, of all types, puts a strain on immigrant families who are trying to make the most of a difficult situation.

Migrants also depend on their familial network in the “transition phase”—that is, when they arrive to their destination but do not yet have a job or the means to live on their own. For most the interviewees in this study, family members who made the journey to the United States

¹⁶ Ana Ortiz interviewed by author on March 21, 2017 in Arlington, Texas. Page 2 of transcript.



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before them predetermined their migration trajectory. Migrants relied upon their family members and oftentimes spent a few months, or even years, living with family until they could transition into their own space. Parrillo (1991) indicates this struggle in his article, stating, “[o]nce they [immigrants] arrived, the newcomers usually sought in their families the emotional support to sustain them through the harsh, even dehumanizing living and working conditions in an often-hostile society” (p. 131). The “transition phase” can last anywhere from a few weeks to years. In this phase we also see “familism/*familismo*” at play. Family members feel responsible for their kin and continue to provide assistance, and in some cases—a home, as long as necessary.

Gabriela’s, 23, experience is an example of the importance of family networks and the longitude of the “transition phase.” Her mom decided to move them to Dallas because that is where she had the most family. The three of them moved between her uncles in Dallas and its suburbs. Her mom did not want to overstay their welcome anywhere, thus they moved constantly. While they counted on family in their transition to life in the United States, they did not have stability. Gabriela and her family lived with relatives even through her high school years—nearly a decade of bouncing between houses.

The pioneers who came to the United States with no network encountered an exceptionally difficult journey; they had no choice but to forge their own path. First generation immigrants did not not have the luxury of a solid family network to guide them and provide a safe haven of sorts once they arrive. Unlike second and third generation immigrants, they do not have the benefits of *familismo*. Such was the case for Monica, 37, who crossed into the United at 16 years old. Monica was born in the United States but was raised in Mexico and had no memories of ever being in the U.S. She had no family in the United States but decided to come here with friends. Monica expressed that she avoids remembering what it was like when she moved to the United States because it was a miserable and lonely time. She said, “[i]t hurts



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a great deal because you do not overcome the fact that you are without your parents, without your family...you do not overcome it.”¹⁷ Monica had the legal ability to return to Mexico but she did not have the financial freedom to do so and found herself trapped in a new country that she was not as enamored with as she anticipated. Parrillo (1991) states, “first-generation Americans, as the social products of another society, may learn to function within their new society, but a part of them will always remain attached to the old country and its ways” (p. 140). Monica has spent her life in the United States with yearning to feel at home in the United States while simultaneously dreaming of her life in Mexico.

Life without her family sparked stress-induced seizures that worsened when she became a single mother of three. Her children each have different fathers and while two of the three men provide her with some sort of child support, she has no one to help her with daily parenting responsibilities. Monica asserts that these responsibilities have made it challenging for her to maintain employment because any time something comes up with one of her children, she is the sole provider available. She shared that even after twenty years in the United States she has not stopped yearning for her family. Monica exemplifies how the absence of family can be equally impactful for immigrants as the presence of family in the United States. Their absence made her transition burdensome and resulted in her physical and mental breakdown whereas immigrants with family in the United States have a network of support to alleviate hurdles they encounter in their new home. That is not to say that immigrants with family in the United States face no challenges but rather that they have access to more resources to overcome said challenges.

Migrants also relied on family to assist them in securing a job. Parrillo (1991) discusses how “nepotism in the workplace—whether in the mills, mines, and factories of past years or the restaurants, grocery stores, and retail stores of today—has thus been a hallmark of immigrant labor” (p. 142). The overflow of kinship networks in the workplace explains the

¹⁷ Monica Adame interviewed by author on February 17, 2017 in Arlington, Texas. Page 1 of transcript. Translated by author.



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clustering of ethnic groups in certain occupations. Immigrants were often not only working for themselves but for the betterment of their family and kinship group. Family connections serve multiple purposes for long-distance migrants and ease the transition from Mexico to the United States. Even when the familial situation is less than ideal, it is usually better than the alternative of having to fend for oneself in a new country. Parrillo (1991) expresses this sentiment, stating,

The path was not easy; many endured struggle, hardship, heartbreak and tragedy. Yet as the immigrants sought their destiny, two key elements enabled the human spirit to prevail: the individual's resolute quest for a better life and the family's emotional and moral encouragement to carry on (p. 143).

Family provides the comfort of home despite being hundreds or thousands of miles away. For those who choose to migrate long distance, their local kinship network can offset hardships but there are some challenges that one must grapple with on their own; self-identification is one such obstacle.

Immigrants & Self-Identity

The generation of immigrants who arrived in the United States before the age of 15 often struggle to self-identify because they do not fit neatly into one cultural group. They have been raised predominately in the United States but by Mexican parents with deep roots in the Mexican culture. Their parents have passed down traditions, but they do not have many memories tying them to Mexico; they must try to find a balance between American and Mexican culture. This is particularly precarious for children who arrived in the United States illegally because they are not U.S. citizens and they have limited memories of Mexico, at best.

Gabriela said she now feels more “Americanized” than she would like. Although she believes it makes sense to feel this way given that she has lived in the United States twice as long as she ever did in Mexico, it still pains her to accept this truth. Gabriela expressed, “I feel like I’ve lost a piece of who I am. I’ve started to notice that some words in Spanish I can’t recall, so I have to Google translate, which is such a shame. Like I’m Mexican, who would do



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that?”¹⁸ Retaining her Mexican culture became more difficult after she moved away for college because she no longer had a built-in network of family members with whom to interact and was not speaking Spanish daily. Gabriela’s husband does not speak Spanish, which means that English is the only spoken language at home. She said she speaks to her mom two or three times a week but that is not sufficient for maintaining and developing her vocabulary.

Gabriela’s testimony is an excellent introduction for a discussion on transnationalism. Transnationalism has been defined as embedded identities “simultaneously being connected to two or more nation states by building multiple relationships across these, including economic, social, organizational, religious, and political relationships” (Ziyanak, 2016, p. 220).¹⁹ Gabriela had roots in Mexico that she was not ready to let go but, in some ways, were being severed by the everyday pressures of living in a foreign country. She was living less of transnational life than she wanted. The longer she remained in the United States, the more distant she became from Mexico. Scholar Sebahattin Ziyanak (2016) believes that the most important factor in transnational migration is based on strong network relationships (p. 222). They also state that transnationalism is more evident in first generation migrants than in second generation migrants. Based on the testimonies I encountered, I agree that there is a decline in the dual connection that exists for the second generation and beyond—particularly those who are born in the United States and have no first-hand encounters with Mexico.

Betsy, 23, recalled the one time her parents seriously considered returning to Mexico. It was during the 2008 financial crisis and her father had lost his job and was struggling to find a new one. She clearly remembers not wanting to move to Mexico because she had acclimated to the United States and did not feel “Mexican enough” to live there. Her Mexican family members made comments about her not speaking Spanish perfectly because she had become too American; this made her self-conscious about her Mexican roots. The fear of having to return to Mexico provoked an identity crisis. She did not know how to identify herself and struggled

¹⁸ Gabriela Diaz interviewed by author on April 5, 2017 via skype.

¹⁹ For more on transnationalism see: Briggs *et al.* (2008); Pence and Zimmerman (2012); Levitt (2001); Portes (2003); Takenaka (2000); Yang (2006).



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with the complex—“no soy de aquí, ni de allá,” I am not from here or there. Betsy said that even now, she does not feel like she belongs in either country because while she feels American, she is constantly reminded that she is not by the limitations she encounters without citizenship or residency. Richard Alba’s (2006) article, “Mexican Americans and the American Dream,” articulates this struggle stating,

Because American immigration policies have induced a settlement process, even for the undocumented, many undocumented Mexican children are now growing up in the U.S. They are being educated in American schools and placed in a social limbo as a consequence: raised as Americans, they cannot easily go back to Mexico; but without legal status, their U.S. educations are of no significance in the U.S. labor market. Their situation is one of the quiet tragedies of the contemporary immigration scene (p. 294).

This situation is all too common and it goes beyond simply a social limbo or non-existent labor market—it is a deep seeded identity struggle that, for many, feels impossible to overcome.

Language is another overwhelming obstacle. The language barrier immediately intimidated Maribel, 55, when she arrived in the United States. She intended to learn English once she and her husband were settled in Dallas but was pregnant with her first child and had three more children in close succession. Thus, Maribel decided to devote her time to raising and caring for her children rather than take language classes. Once her children were in school, she earned her cosmetology license and began working. Unfortunately, jobs were limited to Hispanic neighborhoods where the clientele is predominately Spanish speaking because she does not speak English. Maribel believes that if she knew English she could work in an upscale salon and easily make double what she earns now but until she tackles the language obstacle, she does not have that luxury. For the majority of the interviewees’, learning English was a roadblock that they were required to overcome if they hoped both to find success and a sense of belonging in the United States.

It is worth noting that the endurance of the Spanish language in the United States—in all geographic zones—is a bit of an anomaly. Unlike most mother-tongue languages that become extinct within three generations in the U.S. (evident among European-American



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groups), the Spanish language is preserved (Alba, 2006, p. 291).²⁰Alba (2006) states, “Hispanic groups show much higher rates of bilingualism among second-generation adults than the European groups of the last great wave (1880-1925) generally did, and bilingualism persists among a minority in the third and later generations” (p. 291). He argues that the preservation of the Spanish language is primarily a result of high rates of new immigration and not necessarily indicative of language being passed down from generation to generation (Alba, 2006, 291). I agree that the impact of new immigration is a key factor in the continuity of the Spanish language in the United States, however, one should not discount the value that Hispanic families place on passing language down to their children.

Conclusion

Family, gender, and identity are important aspects of Mexican immigration that help one understand immigration on the ground and not as an abstract political policy without personality. Migrants face obstacles that range from identity, language, culture, employment, and living. They must find ways to overcome these challenges either independently or through their network of family and friends to survive in their new home. I believe family is at the heart of this movement—family is the driving force behind migration trajectories. Even migrants who move independently choose their location based on where they have an established network to ease the transition. This is unsurprising given the salience of family in the Hispanic culture.

Familismo informs migration experiences at home and across the border. Decisions are made based on what is best for the family and are put in front of one’s individual needs. This could include the initial decision to migrate and send remittances home, or it could include the decision to remain in Mexico. The women from my study were by and large migrating to places where they had family ties and were, in many ways, following a predetermined trajectory. Out of the 21 women from my study, only 1 was a first-generation migrant without any family ties in the United States. Research conducted by Marcela Cerrutti and Douglas S. Massey (2001)

²⁰ Alba cites two exceptions to this norm—the Germans in the Midwest, who created bilingual public-school systems that functioned up to WWI, and French Canadians in New England.



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using the Mexican Migration Project supports this conclusion. They found that “women almost always follow other family members, either the husband or a parent; only a tiny minority-initiated migration independently” (p. 187). Because of this, their agency in the decision-making process, and in their migration experience itself, has often been overlooked. Cerrutti and Massey (2001) argue, “[t]he presence of the gendered power difference within the family does not mean that women are entirely powerless, nor that they play no role in household decision making” (p. 187). It is important to remember this instead of minimizing their experience and perspective.

The women from this study shed light on the diverse ways that women may experience migration and how they feel about the process. Whether they travel independently or with a spouse, their perspective adds a layer to migration histories. The information provided by interviewee testimonials is invaluable because it provides an inside look to *who* these people, *why* they want to live in the United States, and *how* they made it possible.

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