From Mexico to South Carolina: A Study of Undocumented Women

(De México a Carolina del Sur: Una Investigación de Mujeres Indocumentadas)

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Resumen

Las mujeres indocumentadas de México son parte de una población nueva y de rápido crecimiento en el sureste de los Estados Unidos de América. Este estudio aborda la cuestión del proceso que llevan a cabo las mujeres indocumentadas en su viaje a Carolina del Sur, a través de la observación de sus vidas en México, su travesía a los Estados Unidos, la calidad de vida en el presente y sus deseos para el futuro. La investigación fue hecha en Carolina del Sur por medio de entrevistas realizadas a veinte mujeres indocumentadas de México utilizando el Grounded Theory (teoría desarrollada de manera cualitativa). Se realizaron las entrevistas en español con casetes y transcripciones. Los resultados explican que el viaje a los Estados Unidos es un proceso de cuatro fases, incluyendo la migración al norte, la llegada a Carolina del Sur, el trabajo y la vida en el Sureste, y el retorno posible a México. A lo largo del proceso, las mujeres han demostrado fuerza y tenacidad para vencer los obstáculos y crear una nueva vida para ellas mismas y para sus familias en Carolina del Sur. Y la importancia del transnacionalismo resulta evidente: ellas mantienen un contacto estrecho con sus comunidades de origen en México. Los hallazgos indican que se necesitan más investigaciones sobre la tenacidad de las mujeres y el proceso de largo plazo de la migración a los Estados Unidos. Los resultados contribuyen a los estudios sobre los Latinos en Carolina del Sur y el sureste de E.U.A.

Abstract

Undocumented women are part of a new and growing population in the southeastern United States. This study looks at the question around the process that undocumented women take in their journey to South Carolina through looking at their lives in Mexico, the journey to the United States, the quality of present lives, and the hopes for the future. Data was collected in South Carolina through interviews with 20 undocumented women from Mexico using a grounded theory approach. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, and transcribed. The results show that the journey to the United States is a four-phase process including the migration northward, arrival in South Carolina, working and living in the Southeast, and a possible return to Mexico. Throughout the process, the women have demonstrated strength and resiliency in overcoming barriers and building a new life for themselves and their families in South Carolina, but the importance of transnationalism is apparent as the women continue to maintain strong connections with sending communities in Mexico. The findings suggest that more research is necessary regarding resiliency and longitudinal processes of migration in the southeastern United States. Results contribute to the literature on Latinos in South Carolina and in the southeastern United States.

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Introduction

The estimated number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States is growing. According to research conducted through the Pew Hispanic Center as many as 9.9 million undocumented workers are living in the United States (Bean, Van Hook, & Woodrow-Lafield, 2001). Bean *et al.* (2001) estimates between 3.4 and 5.8 million of these workers are of Mexican descent. Efforts to add more security to the U.S./Mexico border have done little to stop the flow of immigrants from Mexico and Central America into the United States (Rothenberg, 1998); thousands of miles of shared border between these two countries are simply too vast for effective control. Covert deals between Mexican smugglers, *coyotes*, and United States officials limit the number of undocumented immigrants sent back to Mexico (Lucas, 1993; Rothenberg, 1998). Legislation such as the H2A Guest Worker Program results in Mexican workers legally entering the country and overstaying their visas (Rothenberg, 1998). These practices lead to the manufacture and sales of cheap food and goods in the United States. Consumers pay less, employers make money, and undocumented workers bear the brunt of substandard wages and living conditions.

Undocumented female workers from Mexico face additional barriers in attaining support needed to enhance their quality of life. These women enter the United States with a limited number of opportunities to advance in their occupations, education, and socioeconomic status (Guendelman, 1987; Lucas, 1993). In addition to these general barriers, gender expectations demand that undocumented women quickly adapt to life in the United States and take on added responsibilities of providing a comfortable and safe home for their spouses and children (Smart & Smart, 1995). These women face challenges of enrolling their children in school, providing needed health care, and shopping in unfamiliar stores while knowing little about the language or culture of this new country. Furthermore, their immigration status limits the amount of freedom Mexican women have in making choices needed to maintain support in their lives.

Mexican Migration in South Carolina

There are several factors contributing to Mexican migration to South Carolina. In the past decade, South Carolina has experienced growth in the number of immigrants from Mexico. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that there are approximately 104,814 Hispanics in South Carolina and of this estimate, 71,305 of them are Mexican. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), the population of Mexicans in South Carolina will increase from 1.4% to 1.8%. Although these numbers are still low in terms of total population, the increase is higher than any other race or ethnicity in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

There is little data on the specific number of undocumented Mexican women living in South Carolina. The Census reports that in 2000, there were 37,292 female Hispanic or Latinos living in South Carolina out of a total of 95,076 people who are Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census, 2000). The U.S. Census also reports that 34.2% of all Hispanic women live in the South. Given that the Census underestimates the Hispanic/Latino population (especially in terms of undocumented immigrants), the number of Hispanic/Latina women in South Carolina is higher.

This influx of Hispanics, and predominantly Mexicans, in South Carolina creates challenges for both immigrants and the state. Language is a crucial issue; most of the newcomers speak Spanish, have had few opportunities to learn English, and cannot communicate well with other South Carolinians (Dale, Andreatta, & Freeman, 2001). Undocumented women in South Carolina, like many people living in rural areas and/or impoverished communities in the southeastern United States, are also limited in terms of transportation opportunities. The state only issues drivers' licenses to state residents with social security cards. Undocumented women must often rely on informal networks and/or risk arrest when developing ways to arrange transportation. Finally, long-time residents of South Carolina often resent losing their jobs to new immigrants. This reality creates unjust work environments for employees and fuels antagonism between undocumented

immigrants and legal residents. The undocumented workers are blamed for the economic demise of rural communities in the Southeast.

Transnationalism and Social Identity

There is a growth of recent literature on the issue of transnationalism. Transnationalism suggests that Mexican migrants in the United States, while physically separated from their communities back home, experience a new borderless culture in which there is a constant sharing and flowing of communication. Portes (1999), in his work on modes of immigrant incorporation, describes transnationalism as a complex series of political, economic, and sociocultural processes that require long-term processes across borders. Basch, Glick-Schiler, and Szanton-Blanc (1994) define transnationalism in terms of social relations formed by communities on either side of the border. Levitt (2001) conducted research on the presence and importance of transnationalism in the lives of female Dominican workers. Finally, pertinent to this research, Lacy (2004) emphasized the importance of transnationalism in the survival of Mexican communities in South Carolina. Through the lens of transnationalism, Mexicans living in the United States have the resources they need to stay connected to their sending communities and have limited interaction with mainstream society.

The increase in research on transnationalism has led to new theories regarding ethnic and national identity. Hutnik (1991) describes ethnic identity as a two-dimensional process in which individuals assimilate into the new culture and maintain ties with their own ethnicity. Boneva and Frieze (2001) describe the identity of Mexican migrants in terms of a personality model that includes motivation to seek work, have autonomy, reconnect with family, and a general sense of adventure. Research by Lacy (2004) suggests that Mexican migrants are less likely to participate in the political process in Mexico or the United States and, due to fear of discrimination with the label “Mexican,” tend to identify themselves in terms of region rather than nationality. Levitt (2001) suggests that transnationalism shapes not only the identity of the migrant community but also the identity of the sending community.

Methodology

This study addressed the past, present, and hopes of undocumented women from Mexico. The primary research question in this study was: What is the process for undocumented women from Mexico who journey to South Carolina? The study was based on qualitative methodology focusing on individual interviews with undocumented women from Mexico. Data was captured through both the preliminary ethnographic study and through grounded theory. The researcher used Atlas-ti software to analyze the data. The study was conducted over a period of two years.

The study involved two phases. In the first phase, the researcher participated in an ethnographic study of the undocumented community. The researcher spent over one-hundred hours getting to know residents, accompanying families in their daily routines, and socializing with community members. Field notes were conducted at the end of each visit. The researcher used this approach to gain a better understanding of undocumented workers and to build rapport and trust with community members.

In the second phase, individual interviews were conducted with twenty women. The researcher enlisted the assistance of community gatekeepers in helping her gain access and permission to interview undocumented women. All of the women interviewed were between 18 and 45 old. Thirteen of the women were from Veracruz, three from Oaxaca, one from Jalisco, three from Nuevo León (two from Monterrey). In terms of immigration to the United States, 11 of the women entered illegally through the assistance of a coyote and 9 of the women entered legally through a tourist visa that has since expired.

The researcher adopted a number of steps to ensure privacy and protection of the participants. All data was collected in compliance with the Institutional Review Board. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio taped. Over fifty hours of interviews

were recorded. Tapes were kept in a locked file cabinet. Names and other identifying information were not linked to the tapes. All names of the participants have been changed in this article in order to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

The findings from this study address issues around planning for the journey, actual migration processes, establishing a new home in South Carolina, and plans for the future. The results emphasize the need to understand the migration of undocumented women from a transnational perspective.

Phase 1: Planning Stages of Journey Northward

None of the women in this study described their journey to South Carolina as a planned process. In fact, in most of the cases, the women never intended to migrate at all to the United States. The participants explained that the economic situation in Mexico forced young, healthy men in each family to travel to the United States in search of work. The sending communities assumed that in a few years, after saving money, the men would return to Mexico and build a better life for families.

In the first stage of migration, young men from Mexico moved to South Carolina. The economic crisis in Mexico and tales of work opportunities in the United States motivated men to make the journey northward, working in agriculture in areas in the western United States with large concentrations of migrant farmworkers. Through entering into debts of up to $2000, the men crossed the borders into the United States with the help of *coyotes*. During this stage the women continued to live in Mexico with the majority of their family members, waiting for their relatives who had migrated northward to return.

In the second phase of migration, the Mexican migrants moved to the southeastern United States. These workers learned of opportunities for more lucrative work in areas such as construction and meat processing plants. In addition, they also

heard rumors of cheaper living expenses and better housing conditions. Unlike in traditional migrant farmworking camps where workers lived close together and slept on floors in barracks, the men moving to South Carolina were able to rent trailers, giving them more independence from other workers. Pleased with this growing independence, Mexican workers in the Southeast called home and talked with family about the abundant work opportunities and available housing in areas such as South Carolina.

In the third phase, as more men journeyed directly to South Carolina, Mexican women became heads of the households. These women found work in stores and factories, took care of their children, cared for the elderly, and managed the homes. As Socorro stated:

> I had to change my entire life. I went from being the *ama de casa* ("love of the house" or essentially housewife) to working everyday at our store. I also had to take care of our two children. I was alone, and I was scared. I missed my husband but my daily concerns centered on having enough strength to keep the family going and keep the children in school.

Their husbands, fathers, and brothers sent money directly back to these sending communities, supplementing the income that women made through their own employment in Mexico. The women in this study talked about the difficulties in adjusting to these new responsibilities, but through their resiliency they learned how to live independently and make decisions without the help of husbands and fathers. As Ruth stated:

> I liked working on my own. I had never lived by myself before. It was hard to move to a new country and not be independent.

Cassandra also talked about the excitement of living alone and how she learned during her time without her husband that "I can do anything." These women were able to take advantage of their time living independently to build on their own strengths and develop their own potential for taking care of the home and managing money without husbands, brothers, and cousins.

Finally, during the fourth phase of migration, women and children moved to South Carolina. In most cases their husbands and other male relatives had secured permanent housing in South Carolina, found full-time employment, and talked about the desire to live in the state for several years. Mexican women faced the choice of continuing to live in Mexico and waiting for their husbands, fathers, and brothers to eventually return or to move northward as well.

Several factors contributed to this decision to make the journey to South Carolina. First, many of the women described the loneliness in living apart from loved ones and the constant desire to be reunited with family members and especially spouses. Second, women described the boredom that emerged in their lives in Mexico. As more and more of their family members moved north, the women left behind had fewer opportunities to interact with other family members and to keep alive some of the festivals, holidays, and other family occasions that had once been so important to them. Third, the desire for adventure was strong among the women interviewed. They welcomed the opportunity to try something new and build a new life in the United States. This excitement and need for adventure speaks to the strengths that the women had developed during their time living apart from male relatives. The women in this study blossomed from these independent lives and from this opportunity sprang their desire to learn more about the world.

Phase 2: The Journey to South Carolina

The women in this study consistently traveled to South Carolina by two methods. About half of the interviewees applied for a tourist visa in Mexico. They gave proof that residents in the United States would host them during their 'vacation' and they asked for permission to visit Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Ruth stated:

> I have never visited Disney World in my life, nor did I ever intend to go. I knew I would travel to Charlotte [North Carolina] and then meet my sister at the airport.

All of the participants with tourist visas then overstayed their visit and continue to live illegally in South Carolina.

Some of the women with tourist visas bought airplane tickets for their journey to the United States. None of these women had ever traveled via an airplane, and they talked about their fear of flying. The women, however, overcame their fears and made these journeys to a new country without any assistance. In other cases, women with tourist visas took the land route and crossed into the United States via border checkpoints. These women faced dangers of traveling long distances to the border (and often while pregnant and/or with young children), but through their inner strength and resiliency they managed to triumph over these obstacles.

Other women in this study crossed illegally into the United States without proper documentation. These women had a different and more dangerous experience in their journey. The interviewees without documentation employed the services of *coyotes* to help them elude *La Migra* and escape being caught and sent back to Mexico. Due to the dangers of rape, other violence, harsh environmental conditions, and the strenuous physical demands of crossing the Rio Grande, hiding from immigration officials, living in the desert, and walking for days without rest, none of these participants traveled alone. Cassandra stated:

> They told us that we only had to walk about 4 hours. So we thought it would not be so bad. But we walked and walked and walked and walked all night long, thinking that we would reach our ride soon. The next morning came and went and we finally reached our ride in the afternoon. Then we heard that immigration was coming and it was too dangerous for us to continue. We heard a noise and we hid in the back of a truck. The truck was supposed to take us to Tucson but since immigration was coming the truck let us out on the side of a road. There were 96 of us and we didn't know where we were.

In all instances the women journeyed northward with other family members. These participants persisted in their journey despite illness, injury, and even multiple deportations. Three of the women studied were even pregnant during the journey. Most of the women interviewed explained that, although the journey was difficult, they knew it was part of the process of immigrating illegally to the United States and were prepared for the consequences. These statements again reflect the women's resiliency.

Phase 3: Establishing a Home in South Carolina

In the third phase of the migration process, the women established residency in South Carolina. They traveled to the United States with an understanding of their immigration status and limitations, but most of the women were not prepared for the realities of discrimination in South Carolina. As Guadalupe stated:

> When I arrived in the United States I was at a total loss. I went to the woman at the counter and asked her for help. She spoke to me in English even though she clearly knew Spanish. I asked for her to please speak in Spanish and she would not. I could not believe that someone of my own race would not help me out. That was my introduction to the United States.

The women demonstrated the remarkable ability to develop their own sense of freedom and independence despite living in oppressive conditions. As Guadalupe stated:

> I did not give up. I told the woman that I knew she spoke Spanish and she needed to help me. I had never been to the United States but I was not going to be afraid.

Others such as Ruth explained that she preferred to ignore the discrimination and focus on her own family.

The first factor in establishing a home in South Carolina was seeking employment. The participants in this study described how they worked the long and hard hours, including hazardous positions at meat packing plants. None of the women in this study earned over $6.50/hour and all of the women who worked described the exhaustion from working full shifts and caring for family members. Nevertheless, undocumented women were grateful for employment opportunities. They welcomed the opportunities for employment in the United States and wages that far exceeded salaries in Mexico. These interviewees considered having a job and contributing to the family income (including family living in the sending communities) as important.

The second component of making a home in South Carolina was taking advantage of educational opportunities. Despite the barriers in furthering their education while balancing responsibilities of motherhood and work, the women were thankful for the opportunities to attend adult education programs. They were excited about the opportunities to study English, obtain a high school diploma, develop computer skills, and in some cases even attend college. Ana explained:

> I told Alma [a bilingual social worker] that I wanted very much to study but that I could not attend classes. She told me not to worry and she brought books to my house for me to read. I really like this a lot because now I can study in my free time.

The women in this study saw the value in education not only for themselves but also for their children. Guadalupe, for example, studied in the adult education center for over a year and took the GED (General Educational Degree) exam three times before she finally passed. She managed to achieve this goal while taking care of two adolescents. Cassandra worked third shift as a cleaning woman and then attended GED and computer classes from 9-12 every morning. By furthering their own education, the women were preparing for a better quality of life for themselves, their children, and their extended family.

In addition to a general desire to increase their education, the women in this phase of the journey valued learning English. Ana described the language difficulties that she and other women encountered on a day-to-day basis:

> People get impatient if you don't know English. This happens to me at McDonald's. They want me to order rapidly, and I don't know the language.

Several of the women in the study were taking ESL (English as a Second Language) classes at the local adult education centers. One woman studied ESL two nights a week, GED two nights a week, and drove her daughter to college every morning. Another woman practiced English by investing in a set of videos. Another participant who had come to the United States with no formal English instruction was now enrolled

in the state university system and studying to be a teacher. The women in this study were very aware of opportunities to learn English and worked hard to take advantage of these classes. Their legal status did not prevent undocumented women from navigating the educational system.

Finally, in this phase of the journey the women described the importance of being healthy. The women wanted to be in good health in order to work, take care of their children, and reach their goals. The women in this study reported that they did not want to rely on social services or worry about high medical bills, especially since most of them and their families did not have health insurance. By maintaining healthy lifestyles, including eating well, protecting themselves from injury at work, and keeping regular family planning check-ups, the women believed they could avoid high costs of health care. In general, good health assured a level of independence and thus a higher quality of life for women who were undocumented.

Fourth Phase: Planning for the Future

In the fourth phase of the journey, the undocumented women discussed their hopes for the future. First, undocumented women from Mexico wanted to increase their own independence in the United States. Guadalupe stated, for example:

> My husband and I gave up a peaceful life in Mexico so that our children could have a better education. That is all that we want here in the United States.

They described this independence in terms of getting a South Carolina driver's license, having a secure job, and owning a home. Two participants in this study even explained how they had purchased homes in the United States, despite their immigration status, through using tax identification numbers. Again, their resiliency played a major part in their eagerness to pursue these dreams.

Second, in looking towards the future, undocumented women wanted a better future for themselves and their children. They defined a better future as receiving a high-quality education and finding a good job. Nora stated:

> We have to start somewhere and take things one step at a time. Today I get my diploma. Tomorrow I learn English. In the future I might have a different career as a veterinarian. I need to be prepared for the future.

Nora's statement reflected many of the women's desire for educational opportunities and their recognition of their inner ability to achieve these goals. The women stated that by furthering their own education and seeking employment that they were serving as positive role mod.

In concluding the phases of the migration process, the women in this study planned to return to Mexico. They strongly identified with their sending community, communicated with families in Mexico, and were not interested in living permanently in the United States. Most of the women in this study identified themselves based on their particular state in Mexico. Nora said:

> My house in Córdoba is locked up and waiting for me to return. Our furniture is there. We have two dogs who guard the surroundings. We have not been back in three years, though.

The women expected that this return migration would not happen until their children had graduated from high school and had careers. They were supportive of their children continuing to work in the United States but assumed that their children would continue sending money and resources back to Mexico.

A New Theory on Undocumented Women and Mexican Migration

The results of this dissertation suggest that the migration of undocumented women from Mexico to South Carolina must be understood in the context of strengths and resiliency. This resiliency is evident in each of the four phases of the process of migration. In the first phase of the migration process, while still living in Mexico, women demonstrate an ability to rise above the loss of husbands and other family members living abroad. They assume new roles as heads of household. They take on other work responsibilities. And

they manage the money, safety, and well-being of their children and elderly family members left behind.

In the second phase of the migration process, the women prepare for and undertake the journey to the United States. In this process, their sense of adventure and courage is evident. They make the decision to travel to South Carolina with very little understanding of the state itself, the living conditions, the language, or the culture. They prepare for the journey with the help of other family members but are the primary caretakers of the children in the process. Some of the women develop creative ways to obtain tourist visas to the United States under the premise of visiting Disney World. Others brave crossing the Rio Grande when, in many instances, they are not good swimmers and have entrusted their lives to the care of complete strangers. The undocumented women make this journey in part for economic reasons but also for a longing to be reunited with spouses, companions, and other family members in South Carolina. They choose to leave familiar worlds behind in order to complete this reunification.

In the third phase of the migration process, the women establish their new lives in South Carolina. Their resiliency is evident as they learn how to drive cars, avoid police officers and traffic stops, enroll in adult education classes, graduate with GEDs, build informal markets (selling food to local Mexican stores, sewing traditional dresses and costumes for festivals, painting, playing music) and even buy a home. Undocumented women learn quickly how to live and survive in the United States, despite the fact that many times they cannot speak the language nor access the social service systems, and they earn low wages.

This resiliency in no way negates the realities of oppression that the women face in the United States, but it does point to a new way of looking at undocumented women (and men) from a strengths perspective rather than through purely victimization. The next step in the development of this theory is to look at the undocumented women through a longitudinal perspective in order to determine if this resiliency and determination also

plays out in their stated goals to earn a substantial sum of money in the United States and return permanently to Mexico. If the return migration does not unfold for the majority of undocumented women, this theory suggests that through their resiliency they will continue to persist in South Carolina and continue to make the most of their lives in creative and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that undocumented women from Mexico follow four phases in their journey to South Carolina. In the first phase, women assume new roles as heads of households in Mexico while male relatives undertake the migration process to the United States. In the second phase, women from Mexico decide to journey to South Carolina to reunite with family members, seek adventure, and establish a better life. In the third phase, the women settle in South Carolina, find work, care for their families, and pursue their own goals. In the fourth phase, the women plan to return and retire in Mexico.

These phases of the migration process are important for social work practice and policy. Social workers in South Carolina and elsewhere must be aware of the reasons that Mexican women decide to migrate illegally to the United States, the struggles that they have faced in this process, and their own desires for the future. Practitioners must be aware of the difficulties that women face in illegal migration and the implications for their emotional health and well being in the United States. Furthermore, from a strengths perspective, social workers must accept the challenge of discovering the women's goals for the future and helping them find ways to achieve these goals within legal constraints.

In terms of policy, the findings suggest the need for social workers to be active in advocating for immigration reform. The emphasis that the women placed on education supports recent efforts to pass the Dream Act and other educational initiatives that include benefits for undocumented workers. The findings also suggest that, even with the increase in border patrol and Homeland Security, that undocumented migrants from

Mexico will find ways to journey to the United States. The country has the choice of tightening borders, granting another amnesty, or pursuing a systematic reform of current immigration policies. This data suggests that without a systematic reexamination of immigration policies from a transnational perspective, the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico will continue to increase. As policy makers, we have the responsibility to help others understand the complexity of Mexican migration and develop immigration policies that reflect the growth and success of transnational villages.

Areas of Further Study

The findings from this study confirm much of the current literature on the process of immigration from Mexico to the United States. This research, however, contributes greatly to a richer understanding of the lives of Mexican women living in South Carolina. There have not been many studies conducted on Mexican migrants in this state, and the phenomenon of a direct pipeline of migrants from sending communities in Mexico to South Carolina is new. This study presents a number of opportunities for more research on Mexican migration of undocumented immigrants to South Carolina. In addition, this study demands that social workers and other researchers in migration patterns address the issue of resiliency in understanding the ways in which the journey unfolds for undocumented workers. Finally, the research points to the need for more longitudinal studies on migration and transnationalism in the southeastern United States.

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