

## Family Life Across the Border: Mexican Wives Left Behind

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*The human migration process between any two countries has two components that are equally important: the migrant and the family left behind. Unfortunately, the latter component has not received the attention it deserves from researchers and service providers. This study was conducted with 202 Mexican women living in their country, married to immigrant workers residing in the United States. The purpose of the study was to investigate some of the psychosocial dynamics involved in the lives of women left behind as a consequence of their spouses' departure to the United States. Findings revealed that most of these women were satisfied with their husbands' decision to migrate and with their own lives in Mexico. However, they experienced stress associated with the welfare of the absent husband, acquisition of new responsibilities and obligations, and family disintegration. Results are discussed within the sociocultural context of the communities where the women live.*

The phenomenon of international Mexico-U.S. migration has been studied extensively from a multidisciplinary perspective. In this field, we find reports from sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and so on. However, just a handful of such studies acknowledge the importance of the other human component of migration, the family left behind. Most research about international migration disregards the importance of the family members who stay in the country of origin and focuses only on those who migrate.

We were unable to locate any studies addressing the psychosocial aspects of the family members (wife and children) who remain in the immigrant's community at home. However, some immigration experts have indicated that

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the family's psychological and social structure suffers important changes when one of its members migrates to another country. Gordon (cited by Chaney, 1985) suggests that when the head of the household migrates, the family tensions increase considerably, to a point of becoming unbearable, especially for the female left in charge.

Furthermore, Chaney (1985) reported that the needs of a family change radically when one of its members migrates, mainly because in the rural communities the ones who migrate are mostly men, leaving women with the double responsibility of being in charge of the housework and children as before, with the additional responsibility for the economic welfare of the family. Chaney identified a series of needs that rural wives of international migrants have in their original communities. Among others, these needs include opportunities for earning their own money to avoid economic dependency on their migrant husbands, health education for the women and their children, and specialized training in the work that they do, such as agriculture, to sustain their families.

Gonzalez de la Rocha (1989) indicates that the transfer of power and authority from the immigrant male to his wife has the purpose of protection and continuity of the domestic unit. She further suggests that this phenomenon of "female empowerment" is already part of the local culture in communities where there is high male international migration. Gonzalez de la Rocha warns, however, that this empowerment is not by choice of the female, but by cession of the male. The female empowerment warrants the family unity and general welfare during the long absences of the husband.

A somewhat different perspective on this same issue is proposed by Rouse (1989). In his study of migrant families in a transnational migrant community in Mexico, Rouse found that the family members perceive the migration process as a necessary and materially successful response to the economic problems they face in their communities. He further reports that the families in his study emphasized the ways in which they, as families, remained united in the context of migration. But, when asked about the impact of migration in their communities, they were very consistent in their responses and invariably argued that, alongside the material advantages, migration had dismembered families and destroyed domestic life.

The perception of family disintegration as a consequence of migration is also perceived by the immigrant party. Among Mexican immigrants living in the United States, concern over the welfare of family members left behind and guilt for having left the family are important sources of stress that have been found to be significantly related to psychological distress and depressive symptomatology (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Salgado de Snyder, 1986).

The number of immigrants from Mexico in the United States continues to increase steadily, and, as a consequence, more families are being affected by the migration/family disintegration cycle. It is important that researchers and service providers from both countries know and understand the psychosocial dynamics of the family left behind when the male head of household decides to migrate to improve the life conditions of his family in Mexico.

The information presented in this article is a descriptive summary of findings of a systematic and comprehensive investigation of the psychosocial characteristics of Mexican women left behind who are married to male immigrants residing in the United States (Salgado de Snyder, 1991). This research project was guided by the theoretical model of psychosocial stress proposed by Cervantes and Castro (1985).

## Method

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 202 women who had never been out of Mexico and who were married to immigrant workers living in the United States. All respondents were Catholic, with a mean age of 36.2 years ( $SD = 9.9$ ) and a mean educational attainment level of 4.5 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). Respondents had been married for an average of 16.5 years ( $SD = 9.2$ ) and had an average of five children ( $SD = 3$ ). The average time elapsed since the husband migrated to the United States for the first time was 9 years ( $SD = 8$ ). All women in the sample worked for an income, either at home in activities such as handcrafts and food preparation, or in nearby towns as salespeople, maids, and so on.

Our subjects reported that their husbands resided principally in the American states of California (78.2%), Illinois (8.7%), and Texas (9.4%), and had jobs such as agricultural (30.5%), factory workers (43.8%), car wash employees (6.4%), and so forth. Most of the men visited their families in Mexico approximately twice a year, each visit lasting an average of 12 days. Of the respondents, 23% reported that their spouses had never come back to Mexico since they first departed to the United States, but kept in contact with them. Only 5% of the women interviewed did not know the whereabouts of their spouses and 21% did not know what kind of work they were involved in the United States.

### *Procedure*

The initial contact with the subjects was made through community informants (priests, owners of local retail shops, etc.), after which a snowball

procedure was followed. All subjects were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured anonymity and confidentiality in their responses. None of the women contacted declined to participate in the study. All interviews were conducted by a team of two female psychologists, specifically trained for this purpose.

The rural and semirural communities where data was collected are located in the Mexican states of Jalisco and Michoacan and include many of the "sending" communities, identified as such in several Mexico-U.S. migration-related studies. The communities' principal activity is the provision of workers for U.S. labor markets, and their primary source of income is the money that these workers send and bring back home.

### *Instruments*

A complete battery of instruments to assess the variables in the theoretical model proposed by Cervantes and Castro (1985) was used. The battery included measures of psychosocial stress, internal and external resources, coping responses, and outcome measures. However, for the purpose of this article, a selection of the most important results was made, and these are presented in a descriptive way in the Results section. A more detailed report of the data collected can be found elsewhere (Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Salgado de Snyder & Maldonado, 1992, in press-a, in press-b).

The psychosocial stress was assessed with a newly developed instrument, the INEFAM (*Inventario de Estres de la Familia Migrante*), that assesses potentially stressful situations related to the migration of a family member. The INEFAM first calls for the respondent to indicate whether the stress situation described in each of the 20 items has occurred in her case within the past 3 months. If the response to a particular item is affirmative, she is then asked to rate the appraised stressfulness of that situation on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*low stress*) to 4 (*high stress*).

An index of social support to evaluate source, type, and perceived effectiveness of the support received was also administered. The most frequently used coping responses in several areas were also evaluated.

The CES-D (Radloff, 1977) was used to assess generalized psychological distress. This 20-item scale has been widely used to assess depressive symptomatology and generalized distress in Mexico and the United States. The SCL-90 (Derogatis, 1977) has been used previously with immigrant and nonimmigrant populations and evaluates the presence of depression, somatization, and anxiety.

## Results

### *The Decision to Migrate*

Most of the women interviewed reported that they felt they participated in the decision-making process of their husbands' migration (52.7%). The rest of our respondents indicated that their husbands just communicated to them their decision to migrate. The reasons to migrate were varied but most of the motives were quite consistent and reflected the wish to improve the quality of life of the family through higher income in dollars (86.6%). Other reasons mentioned were family problems, wanting to see the United States, and a desire to try their luck.

Overall, the majority of the women interviewed felt that the husband's decision to migrate was a very good one (59.4%), primarily because his income in dollars had improved the family's conditions. The rest of the women felt ambivalent (10.2%) or negative about it (31.2%), because they felt there were problems in the family that they didn't have before, such as family disintegration, more verbal and physical fights, children planning to follow their fathers footsteps, more responsibilities for the women in charge, not enough money received to cover the needs of the family, problems with the extended family, and so on.

When our respondents were asked about their preference to either stay in Mexico or go with their spouse to the United States, 60% said that if given the choice they would prefer to stay in Mexico as they were, and 40% would want to go to the United States and live with their husbands.

### *Facing Life Alone*

Many of the stressful situations faced by these women were a direct consequence of their husbands' migration. The majority of the women interviewed gave a high stress rating to feelings of commitment to increased obligations and responsibilities that they were forced to assume. They felt solely responsible for the household and general welfare of the family: "I've had to take charge of the household" (86.2%,  $\bar{X} = 3.1$ ); "I am responsible of [sic] obligations I didn't have before" (76.7%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ); "I've had to face and solve family problems by myself" (65.8%,  $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ).

Loneliness and lack of support from the absent husband were also identified as stressful situations by most respondents: "I cannot accept that my husband is no longer here" (74.6%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ); "I no longer have my husband's support" (63.9%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ).

As for sources of personal support, it is interesting to note that only 40.5% of the respondents indicated that they had some trusted person, other than their husband, that they could count on. A larger proportion of women reported having access to someone who could provide them with important information (55.5%) and could lend them money if necessary (59.4%).

When asked about how they cope when facing personal problems, the majority (43%) internalized their emotion (cried, suffered), and accepted their fate and 31% avoided thinking about their problems by entertaining themselves in other activities. Only 25% of the women tried, actively, to find a solution to their personal problems.

### *Relationship With the Migrant Husband*

The marital satisfaction scale scores attained by this group of women were almost identical to the scores attained by a control group of 48 women with similar sociodemographic characteristics, but who lived with their husbands ( $\bar{X} = 33.6$  vs.  $\bar{X} = 33.7$ , respectively). Overall, the respondents reported feeling satisfied with their marriage ( $\bar{X} = 3.5$ , on a scale where 1 = *very dissatisfied* and 4 = *very satisfied*) and almost never regretted having married a migrant ( $\bar{X} = 4.3$ , on a scale where 1 = *always regretted*, 5 = *never regretted*).

In spite of this apparent marital happiness, our respondents expressed fear of abandonment: "My husband may forget his customs" (54.0%,  $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ); "may never come back home" (47.0%,  $\bar{X} = 3.2$ ); "may start a new family in the U.S." (45.5%,  $\bar{X} = 3.3$ ). Also, a large proportion of the women interviewed reported stress associated with their husbands' general welfare: "My husband doesn't have enough money to eat" (59.9%,  $\bar{X} = 3.1$ ); "doesn't have enough money to see a doctor" (58.9%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ); "doesn't have a stable place to live" (56.4%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ); "has been influenced by bad friends" (55.0%,  $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ); "has acquired bad habits" (44.5%,  $\bar{X} = 2.8$ ); "could be using drugs or alcohol" (29.7%,  $\bar{X} = 3.1$ ).

The women interviewed were also asked about the ways they cope with marital conflicts. The coping responses most frequently used when facing problems with their spouse were trying to solve the problem through conversation (27.6%); getting even, "I don't cook for him," ". . . make love with him," ". . . wash his clothes," and so on (24.2%); denying the existence of such problems, "I've never had problems with my husband" (27.0%); avoiding conflict by obeying their husbands, "I do as he says" (19.2%); and crying and suffering (3.0%).

In spite of the physical absence of their spouses, the majority of women interviewed (89.0%) indicated that they had received support from their

husband in the last three months. In most cases, (84.2%) it was financial support, which was perceived by the majority as *very* (37.8%) and *extremely effective* (38.2%).

### *The Children*

The women interviewed had from one to seventeen children each, with an average of five children per family, and in most cases (89%), all children lived in the same household with the respondents. Most subjects reported negative changes in family dynamics as a consequence of their husbands' departure. For instance: "My children and I have not helped each other as we did before" (39.1%,  $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ); "Family relations have worsened" (32.1%,  $\bar{X} = 2.8$ ); "My children and I have had increasing conflicts" (31.6%,  $\bar{X} = 3.0$ ); and "There has been physical violence among my children" (29.7%,  $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ).

The most frequently used coping response, when facing conflicts with their offspring, was physical punishment (62.4%), followed by responses directly aimed at the solution of the problem, such as talking with their children (22.2%), avoiding confrontations with their children (11%), and internalizing their emotions by crying, suffering (5%).

Most women reported having received support from their children (65.5%). Moral support was reported by most women (46.4%), followed by financial support (31.9%). Most women perceived support from their children as *very* (33.7%) and *extremely effective* (35.5%). It was interesting that 16.5% of the women felt their children's support was not effective at all.

### *The Extended Family*

The majority of the women interviewed lived in the same household with members of the extended family, such as in-laws, parents, and siblings. Although they had to interact daily with each other, our respondents did not identify these interactions as stress-producing situations. However, when problems with the extended family arose, the preferred coping responses were to avoid confrontation by "doing as they say" (36.3%); engage in violent verbal interactions (24.1%); and deny the existence of such problems (26.3%). Only 5.0% tried directly to solve the problem with the extended family, and 9.2% internalized their emotions by crying and suffering.

Social support was also provided by members of the extended family. Of these women, 35% received support from the parents-in-law, and a higher proportion received support from their siblings (46.5%). The majority also reported receiving support from their mothers (57.2%) and fathers (36.8%). The most effective support provided by the extended family members was

emotional support. The financial support from the extended family was perceived by the majority as *somewhat effective*.

### *Psychological Distress*

The CES-D scores obtained by this sample were high ( $\bar{X} = 23.2$ ,  $SD = 13.2$ ), with a range of 0 to 54. The scores on the stress inventory (INEFAM) were found to correlate significantly ( $p < .001$ ) with CES-D scores ( $r = .43$ ) and the other outcome measures: depression ( $r = .45$ ), anxiety ( $r = .45$ ), somatization ( $r = .32$ ). CES-D scores were also found to correlate significantly with the SCL-90 subscales of depression ( $r = .73$ ), anxiety ( $r = .63$ ), and somatization ( $r = .49$ ).

### **Discussion**

Findings of the present study reveal that the international migration phenomenon may have a similar impact on the mental health of those left behind and those who migrate. A group particularly vulnerable is the one formed by the wives of immigrants, who not only stay behind without the physical presence of their husband, but who are also forced into multiple roles, all of which are highly stressful.

In addition to their traditional role as wives, mothers, housewives, and caretakers, these women are also expected to play the role of financial provider, administrator, head of household, decision maker, and so on. Our findings indicate that most of the women interviewed in this study report having to assume obligations and responsibilities they did not have before, and for which they are not trained. The female empowerment phenomenon as a consequence of migration, discussed by Gonzalez de la Rocha (1989), was clearly observed. However, contrary to the way many may think, most women were not happy with their empowerment.

Before we go any further, it is important to contextualize the findings of the present study within the sociocultural frame provided by the communities where our respondents live. These women are all from rural and semirural areas in Mexico, where the role of women is extremely traditional and limited. Thus the transition of power apparently breaks the traditional and very structured gender roles found in Mexican rural societies, causing both internal and social conflict.

Apparently, the major source of conflict in the women of the study is having to face a dual situation: (a) living in a local society that defines women's role as passive, dependent, and obedient; and (b) having to be



assertive, productive and strong in order that she and the family survive without the stereotypical strength associated with a male head of household.

Our subjects' concerns over the welfare and general living conditions of their husbands in a strange country are legitimate, because none of the women interviewed had ever been in the United States. The information they have about the United States is what they learn through the local media and what the returning or visiting immigrants communicate; the two types of messages are often conflicting. This, and the lack of continuity in communication with their spouses, explains the women's concern over their husbands' welfare and contributes to increases in their levels of stress and psychological conflict.

Family disintegration is another conflicting issue that these women have to face and that significantly contributes to increased psychological distress. As Rouse (1989) advanced, the women interviewed did experience stress related to perceived family disintegration. Two factors are responsible for the women's perception of family disintegration. First is the women's apparent lack of power to control their children when it comes to discipline, cooperation, and maintaining the family unit. Second is the children's desire to follow the footsteps of their father and migrate to the United States as soon as the father so decides.

It has been documented (Rouse, 1989), and this study corroborates those findings, that in sending communities such as the ones in which the study was conducted, it is common that as soon as the male children turn into adolescents and are physically developed, they migrate with their father. The female children, on the other hand, tend to remain at home and help their mother until such time they get married, usually to an immigrant. Most of the young generation of women married to immigrants, however, do not, like their mothers, stay in their communities and wait for their husbands to visit, but instead go along with their new spouses to the United States.

As for the psychological distress experienced by the women of this sample, it is interesting to note that the scores attained in the CES-D were high. The median group score was 24.3%, which one may think is indicative of clinical depression, particularly because such high CES-D scores were found strongly correlated with the SCL-90 scales of anxiety, somatization, and depression. These findings, in a different sample and sociocultural context, may, in fact, be indicative of the presence of important mental morbidity. In this sample and context, however, such high CES-D scores do reflect an important degree of mental discomfort and generalized distress among the women interviewed, but do not necessarily reflect actual psychopathology. This issue has been further discussed elsewhere (Salgado de Snyder & Maldonado, in press-b).

It is important to consider that some of the CES-D items may measure traditional cultural traits expressed in behaviors assigned to, and expected, from a traditional woman whose husband is absent. Thus the CES-D items endorsed by these women, whereas reflecting psychological distress, also reflect the women's ability to perform and feel according to the social expectations (suffering, crying, feeling unhappy, etc.). Again, this does not mean that the women interviewed are free of psychological conflict—they do have sufficient reasons to feel depressed and distressed—but the severity of the conflict may not be as great as the scores indicate, especially because, in spite of the many conflicts they face, these women have a high level of participation in their communities, are active and productive, and have earned the respect of other community members.

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