

**Migration, Sexuality and AIDS: Mexican Women
Farmworkers in California**

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Introduction

María García, 26 years old, had lived in California for only two years, yet she knew that how she moved her body had significant consequences. She avoided a nearby farm when she went seeking work because her kin informed her that the supervisor had a couch in the back of the shed and women were forced to have sex in exchange for a job. Eventually she found a job but the work was hard on her body and she had several health problems. Further, according to focus groups with Mexican women, men outnumbered women by about 20 to 1, and, with little workplace monitoring, women were subject to men's vulgar comments or behavior while working in the fields. María explained, "We work almost all the time bent over with our 'rumps' in the face of whoever comes from behind, which is usually a man." Men occasionally would touch women's genitalia or buttocks or make lewd comments about their bodies. Outside of work, María entered into a sexual relationship with a farmworker and heard that they often spend time with sex workers and might be at risk for sexually transmitted infections. Yet she was unable to request that he use condoms to protect her. María was well aware that she must learn to *defenderse* (protect herself) on many levels if she were to adapt to life in the U.S.

María's experiences illustrate contradictions about power, women's bodies and their safety in predominantly *mexicano* communities in rural California. After they migrate, women are enmeshed in processes of racialized gendered sexuality that constitute what Rayna Rapp calls a "political economy of risk" (2000), where social reproduction and sexuality are stratified—contingent upon Mexicans' placement within the local economy and shaped by political and socio-cultural forces. Mexicana

migrants are racialized (Omi and Winant 1994) and hence situated near the bottom of the labor market (Catanzarite 2000; Ibarra 2000; Villarejo et al. 2000). While some women have found better paying jobs or more comfortable lives, farmworkers work for pittance, endure working conditions that are hazardous, and live in inhumane circumstances—in camps or occasionally even in caves or under trees.¹ In our interviews we found that migrant women struggle to earn an income and create safe environments for their children as well as meaningful lives, which often means confronting risks at work, in their communities and in their intimate relationships. In this context, the social body (Scheper-Hughes 1994; E. Martin 1995) of Mexicana migrant farmworkers is molded by mechanisms that are transnational. Focusing on the U.S. side of a binational context, we will illustrate the twinned processes of sexual harassment and risky sexual behavior, using women's narratives.

Based on qualitative research, our findings illustrate how the material circumstances of their migration and socio-cultural constructions related to sexual behavior and the body place Mexican women migrants at risk for sexual harassment and acquiring STIs. We analyze how values and hegemonic narratives--based in gendered political inequalities--are inscribed or "mapped" upon the bodies of Mexican women farmworkers in California, at times with women's complicity, and how they develop survival mechanisms. We also show how women contest or deconstruct traditional discourses about gender, sexuality and the body. We argue that it is precisely women's transgressions of boundaries where they construct moments of "remapping"—contesting those discourses, creating their own poetics of desire, and establishing meaningful relationships despite the limitation on their sexuality.

Our interpretation builds on the framework by feminist scholars who argue that social reproduction-- of which sexuality is central--should be seen as local expressions of transnational inequalities (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Moore 1988; Martin 1995). In this framework, individuals

imagine and enact cultural logics and social formations through personal struggle, generational mobility, social movements, and/or contestation of powerful religious and political ideologies or the state. Migrant Mexican women's complex local knowledges and cultural practices regarding sexuality and the body reflect their lived experience in a regional political economy, and are choreographed by multiple, intertwined forces. Globalization sets in motion the migration of capital, popular culture, technology, and STIs that cross national borders towards the south as well as push workers into the migrant stream within Mexico and to the north.² Patriarchal ideologies and practices in Mexico and the U.S. create ambiguous notions regarding the body and women's views of themselves as partakers of pleasure. On both sides of the border, Catholicism shapes the moral dimensions of sexuality and the meanings that regulate normative sexual behavior for Mexican women.

Mexican women farmworkers labor in California agribusiness that is dependent upon transnational migration, with more than 90 percent of the labor force from Mexico (Villarejo et al. 2000). Economic restructuring in the binational labor market creates contradictory cultural changes on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border. One way in which subjects imagine and negotiate these complex changes are through the perspective of "peripheral vision" (Zavella 2000). Whether living in Mexico or the U.S., farmworkers imagine their own situations and family lives in terms of how they compare with "*el otro lado*"—on the other side of the border. Peripheral vision originates in the power imbalance between Mexico and the United States, where working class Mexicans in the U.S. and in Mexico experience social dislocation. Peripheral vision is a perspective that includes the frequent reminders that one's situation is unstable in comparison to others "*en el otro lado*," that life fluctuates and is contingent upon the vagaries of the U.S. and Mexican economies, and is formed by those whose daily lives must respond to globalization, including migration.

Whether residing in Mexico or in poor Mexican communities in the U.S., Mexican women are marginalized as gendered subjects and live in "divided social worlds" that require frequent negotiation. In her research with commercial sex workers in Mexico City, Castañeda (1996) suggests that when women remove their "social masks"--that is, provocative work costumes and heavy make-up designed to entice customers--they mark a social transformation from secret worker-warriors who must negotiate everything from violence to STIs to "normal women." Thus sex workers experience estrangement as they move between the violent worlds of work and varied family contexts. In a similar fashion, migrant farmworkers survive the dangers of crossing the border, struggle within socially violent work sites and negotiate changes in their daily lives. Simultaneously, they are linked to kin and other social relationships in Mexico, and are reminded that they should conform to "traditional" Mexican gendered expectations regarding sexuality and social relations in general. We suggest that these women delineate clear notions of the body rife with gendered conflict, and construct practices and meanings that situate them as subjects in relation to communities of origin and settlement.

Methodology

We will base our analysis on data generated through seven focus groups with a total of 68 women of Mexican origin conducted between 1998-1999 as well as ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The groups were formed with the help of community-based health clinics or organizations that work with migrant farmworkers and their families.³ We also conducted individual life histories with 12 women, all mestizas born in Mexico. All of the women we interviewed had low incomes and were situated within the working class or the poor. Their ages ranged from 16 to 56. They have migrated from the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato or Oaxaca, from rural communities as well as cities. Most of them had not completed an elementary education although two women had

degrees from Mexican universities. The women migrated to the U.S. for various reasons--because of labor displacement, seeking refuge from abusive male kin or lovers, accompanying their families, or seeking adventure. They all had migrated as adolescents or adults and thus were socialized in Mexico. The women lived in predominantly Mexicano communities in north central California agricultural regions--the Pájaro Valley in Santa Cruz County, the Salinas Valley in Monterey County, and the San Joaquin Valley in Fresno County. Farmworkers are subject to low wages and few benefits, dangerous working conditions, and the double day at home, largely responsible for most of the household labor as well as working for wages.⁴ We will situate women's narratives by providing information about the political economic and social context where they construct new gendered perceptions and practices about their bodies and sexuality as migrant workers.

The Mexicanization of Rural California

In the rural valleys where we conducted our research, farmworkers are predominantly Mexican men. Farm worker households are large (6.8 members on average), with 2.6 workers per household, and 65 percent have seasonal/temporary farm jobs (Santa Cruz County Farmworker Housing Committee 1993). One study of Mexican farmworkers found that a significant portion (13 percent) had "binational families"--they maintain occupied homes on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. These families provide an anchor for recent migrants and those who return seasonally and often continue to return to their communities in Mexico (Palerm 1991).⁵ Thus Mexican farmworkers maintain key relationships in two social worlds: the predominantly Mexicano farmworker communities in California, and the communities from which they migrated in Mexico.

Agricultural workers play an important role in the complex relations between the U.S. and Mexico. In addition to Mexican workers' contributions in both economies, migrants play a major role

in redefining socio-demographics in the U.S. in general and in California, where more than 45 percent of Mexican migrants reside. Each year between 1990-1996, 230,000 undocumented Mexicans established residence in the U.S. (INS 1998). Sixty three percent of adult farmworkers are legally authorized to work in the U.S.⁶

Agricultural zones in California have become places that generate large amounts of wealth, thanks to the labor of Mexican migrants. Without the efforts of the Mexican farmworkers, it would not be possible to maintain California's dominance in these multi-million dollar industries (INS 1998). Yet as payment for their work, 70 percent of farmworkers receive annual salaries between \$7,500 and \$10,000, placing them well below the federal poverty level (Villarejo et al. 2000). In addition, some employers of agricultural businesses or labor contractors do not report the workers' salaries. Consequently, if farmworkers hurt themselves or reach retirement age, many of them cannot obtain Social Security benefits, Medical or Medicare, which further endangers their health (Office of Minority Health Resource Center 1988).

The availability of long-term jobs has enabled many migrants to establish homes in California, and increasingly migrants are settling permanently. These processes have fueled the "Mexicanization" of rural California, where migrant farmworkers have become the majority population and have changed the character of social life in these communities (Palerm 1991). Rural communities in California have become places of concentrated and persistent poverty, dual societies with a few Anglos who make up the land owners, professionals and white collar workers, and Mexicans who work in the fields, factories and service sector (Palerm 1991; Griffith and Kissam 1995). However, predominantly Mexican communities are also vibrant social places where cultural expressions often resemble those in Mexico.

Although they live and work in one of the richest nations, migrant farmworkers in the U.S. have a Third World health status (Dever and Alan, 1991). Farmworkers have some of this nation's most severe social problems and are at greater risk for infectious diseases and chronic health conditions than the general population because of poverty, malnutrition, exposure to pesticides, and poor housing and hazardous working conditions.⁷ In addition, poverty, stress, mobility, and lack of recreational opportunities make farmworkers especially vulnerable to substance abuse and consorting with prostitutes, and there is a high incidence of STIs in camps of predominantly men (Organista et al. 1996). 70 percent of farmworkers lack health insurance (Villarejo et al. 2000). Women farmworkers face the above health problems as well as high reproductive problems and an infant mortality rate that is 25 percent higher than the national average.⁸ This constellation of poverty and poor health conditions is crucial for situating our analysis of migrant women's gendered sexuality.

In the next section we present the findings on migration, sexual activity, and the body and we discuss how they are intertwined in complex ways in women's lives.

Silences y Mujeres Decentes

The women we worked with were, for the most part, reared within a repressive cultural framework that is not unique but particular to Mexican culture. Centered in Catholicism that instructs them to repress carnal pleasures unless within church-sanctified marriage, women are pressured to construe their yearnings in heterosexual, conventional terms. The salience of the virgin-whore cultural discourse can be seen in the ways in which these women subscribe to notions of silence about sexuality, and a virtual "cult of virginity" where modesty and their reputations as "*mujeres decentes*" (good women) are guarded.⁹ As an attempt to control their behavior, women were told that there was a whole array of signs that their bodies would display if they were to engage in transgressions, and

mothers or other kin would be able to "read" those signs. As Irene explained: "When they lose their virginity, women walk different—with their legs separated--and in their faces and their eyes you can tell that they "know more" (*saben más*), that they have been used by a man (*han tenido uso de hombre*)." Even after marriage, women were supposed to dress and move their bodies in ways that did not appear too provocative. Under these patriarchal constraints, then, the body is regarded as a map: it can be read by others regarding women's transgressions and is a source of betrayal if women do not control how they move or display themselves in public. Simultaneously, women's bodies are viewed as uncontrollable--subject to the whims of passion or provoking reactions by men. Thus women's bodies were policed and their reputations guarded.¹⁰

In the focus groups and interviews, women provided many examples of how their lives were circumscribed to protect them from dishonor or serious social risks. Some women from rural areas were not allowed to walk alone in public in Mexico because of fears of sexual assault. Many of the migrants had little labor market experience or knew how to drive prior to migration. If they did have work experience, it was often near their homes in gender segregated workplaces where they had little direct exposure to male workers. The journey *al norte* itself was fraught with literal and symbolic danger if women came without male protection, for the rumor was that: "the women who come by themselves to the U.S. usually have sex with the smugglers." While the focus groups elicited variations of this general repressive discourse, the women's own experiences suggested that they were neither passive recipients of normative strictures nor uniformly "decent" all of the time.

Sexualization of the Racialized Body in the Fields

After moving to agricultural communities, these women experienced an array of changes in gender relations and expectations and faced possibilities they had only imagined prior to migration. By

living in the U.S., they must grapple with North American constructions of power based on their devalued working class origins, and gender expectations where increasingly women are expected to juggle family and work roles—much as in Mexico. However, they were racialized and sexualized in different ways as well. For Mexicana migrants, their sexuality and fertility were a focus in the contestation of immigrants' use of education, health and social services in the Proposition 187 debates (Chavez 1996). Many women were often uninformed of the rights for which they were entitled, particularly regarding access health care. However, in the U.S., the feminist, gay/lesbian, Chicana/o, immigrant and labor movements have created new discourses about race, citizenship, sexuality and Mexicanas' rights as racialized women. Thus upon migration, Mexicanas must negotiate gender and sexuality within a highly contested social and political context (Zavella 2001).

For those women who worked in the strawberry fields, racialization and sexualization took on specific forms. During the peak of the harvest season of the late 1990s, the labor force was predominantly male. Further, the male farm worker population was internally heterogeneous. It included those older men who originally worked as Braceros, those who are younger and of more recent waves of migrants who have settled permanently, and those who sojourn annually, returning to Mexico after the harvest season. The sojourners included those who left behind wives, lovers and families in Mexico, and those who were single, looking to take a partner back to Mexico, or with whom to settle in California. Unlike their experiences in Mexico in highly gender segregated work sites, the farms of California put women farmworkers in close proximity with men who have varied motivations for establishing intimate relationships. Becoming farm workers creates risks, for they are outside the norms that protect women and have to learn to defend themselves.

In this context, how women presented themselves in public was subject to close scrutiny. Women's work sites in the fields became sexualized social gauntlets. Any expression of availability, signified by wearing make up or "provocative" clothing was noticed by the male coworkers and became the basis upon which they were invited on dates, propositioned for sexual encounters, or sexually harassed on-the-job. Women learned that wearing cosmetics or colognes in the fields provoked unwanted responses. In this regard, María noted that "I can't even wear mascara or they will bother me, want to touch me and start something." Women's bodies, then, were inscribed by social structures, "marked with instructions on how to be *mujer*. . . working class, Chicana" (Anzaldúa 1990:xv), that is Mexican women in the U.S.

Masking the Body

Women farmworkers protected themselves from men's advances or abuse by utilizing a variety of strategies, including covering their bodies. They must wear clothing to protect themselves from the weather and pesticides. Normal work regalia include heavy shirts, baggy pants, sturdy shoes, gloves, hats (often attached to scarves covering their necks), and kerchiefs over their mouths—so they appear cloistered while working, with only their eyes visible. In addition, despite the heat, they must wear shirts tied round their waists to cover their buttocks and genitalia from male scrutiny, commentary, or touches when they bend over to work. María explained:

Well the number of women in the fields is much smaller than that of the men; we can't always be in a crew of only women. It's important to protect ourselves from them [the men] and from what the other women can think. If one walks around showing off her body, then the gossip will get around that we're not there to pick strawberries but to find men.

Removing the layers of clothing is time-consuming, and, given their short lunch breaks, sometimes women retain their cloistered attire during breaks: "Many times we don't even uncover ourselves to eat." They also had to inform newcomers to the community about fields to avoid, or areas of town that are dangerous—such as the farm where according to rumors, jobs were exchanged for sex. In addition to protective clothing related to their jobs, then, women appeared publicly at work with few parts of their bodies exposed and helped one another to protect themselves.

Working in such conditions was not always pleasant and women felt as if they were participating in an alien environment, not dissimilar to women who work in "clean rooms" in high tech firms (Lamphere et al 1993). Irene said: "Sometimes when we are outside the fields, we don't recognize ourselves, we don't know who is working in the crew because there are so many layers of clothing and everything is covered up. It's by voice and the eyes that we can recognize one another. We are covered up (*enmascaradas*)." Such cloistering challenged women's ability to form close social relations with fellow women apart from their close work mates, as Margarita explained: "This happened to me, when I went to pick up my daughter at school, I hear someone's voice and then 'the light bulb goes on' and I say to myself, 'I think that Juana was working with me today.'" Irene expressed her unhappiness regarding her work conditions: "At first it is difficult, later you get used to it. It's as if you are not yourself."

After the work day, as one drives through farm worker communities you can see tired women workers driving, walking home, or shopping in their work clothes, with only the face covering removed. Occasionally, one can see them removing their "uniforms" while in transit in preparation for their private lives. Upon removing the barriers to the elements and harassment they are transformed from farmworkers and sexual objects to women situated within varied social settings that include other

workers and potential sexual partners. In the context of heavy male-female ratios and unregulated work sites, women farmworkers face a dislocation similar to the sex workers that Castañeda (et al. 1996) studied in Mexico City. In their work sites, farmworker women feel alienated and estranged, wrapped in many layers of clothes that function as a protective barrier to the hostile environment --including work and weather conditions, as well as male harassment and women's gossip. Like the "johns" who seek out sex workers, male farmworkers live in decontextualized social environments, where the sanctions for inappropriate behavior are missing or inadequate. In this transnational context, the productive body as well as the sexualized body is mapped for migrant women farmworkers.

Women Remap the Body

While they may accept the necessities of cloistering their bodies at work, women also contest or "remap" the social body in relation to traditional expectations about marriage and the family. For women who are single, there is a wealth of potential lovers or marriage partners. Women find that traditional customs such as chaperones on outings, or expectations of marrying as a virgin are challenged by the changes in their lives after migration. In contrast to previous constraints in Mexico, women have more freedom of movement in the U.S. Even older women or those with children find that the high male-female ratios work in their favor. For example, after migrating to California, Alicia Gonzáles, a middle-aged single-mother with five children, was abandoned by her spouse. She considered herself to be not particularly attractive since she was over-weight and middle-aged. She enrolled in a local community clinic's literacy and English as a Second Language program. Over the course of many months of working on her human capital in between stints of working in the fields, she joined a women's support group whose activities included aerobics classes and discussing personal problems. She told her story and disclosed her newfound attractiveness in the farmworker community with great aplomb:

"Look at me, I'm getting old, I'm fat, and I have five kids. And already I've had two marriage proposals! One man promised to support me and be a father to my kids. But I decided its better not to [accept his proposal]. You can't trust men. Its better if I work to support them myself." Alicia's new sense of independence as a single mother who occasionally dates meant that her desire for stability for her children would be achieved through her own efforts rather than through marriage.

With the availability of so many potential sexual partners in a context of often less social control than they experienced in Mexico, women who are seeking adventure learned to negotiate choices they did not have previously. These choices include everything from how they dressed to where they walked on the streets to recreation possibilities. Perhaps the most disapproving comments were about young women who dressed "scandalously:" "They walk around wearing mini skirts or short shorts, showing off everything!" Part of their concern was the fine line between dressing attractively and too provocatively, which would subject them to harassment in public. Women would avoid the streets where sex workers congregate so as not to face propositions from drunken men who could not tell "working girls" from other women.

However, some women purposely sought out circumstances where the boundaries of social control were more fluid. On weekend nights the local bars and dance halls become sites of aggressive encounters with men, where women were sexual objects in a different social context. If they came with partners, they or their partners did not appreciate the competition and fights would break out when competitors become too aggressive. However, if women came without partners the attention was often desirable and women sought adventure and pleasure at local nightclubs. Through their provocative dress and make up, flirting, or dancing some women found romance at the dance halls. Margarita had sparkles in her eyes as she told us, "I can go to the night club and pick and choose my partners. The

men line up and I choose: 'you, you and you.' I go for the tall cowboys." Even married women frequented the dances as sites of pleasure. Marisela, a married, middle-aged woman, confided. "I can dance all night long. It's so much fun! And then I go home by myself." It is unclear if her spouse knew about these outings, or what his reaction might be. However, Marisela is not the only attached woman who frequents nightclubs, and some of them do not stop at dancing.

Regardless of whether they frequent nightclubs or not, women who were happily married find that they must take care of their bodies and make time for sexual relations with their spouses. When living in large farmworker households, this can be quite a challenge. For example, Carmen lived in a household with 20 male farmworkers and her son, and they slept in a corner of a room cordoned off with a rope and blanket. She considered herself "unnatural" since her innate sex drive (*la naturaleza*) was stronger than her husband's and was "like a man's." Thus she repeatedly had to negotiate securing some privacy from her apartment mates and child so the couple could have sexual intercourse. Other women, married to men who made regular trips as part of their jobs, produce truckers for example, and living in nuclear households, made it a point to schedule in time for privacy from the children so they could have sex. As Dora explained: "My husband is gone all week. And he meets lots of women while making his deliveries. I want to make sure that he *wants* to come home. So I take care of myself and we spend time together apart from the kids. . . . I never had to think about this in Mexico."

When women migrate to California and decide to settle, there are different expectations about the body. Women often feel vulnerable to competition with white women. Alicia elaborated on her sense of needing to work at being attractive to her spouse:

Sometimes over there [in Mexico] you don't take care of yourself. You let yourself get fat. Here there are many ways to take care of married women and there are many

places that help you lose weight. It's as if the men are attracted to something different [here], as if they make a few comparisons.

Paradoxically, Alicia's comments are not supported by the clinical research that shows that obesity actually increases after migrants settle in the U.S. Further, permanent resident Mexican farmworker women who have lived in the California for the longest time are at greatest risk for becoming obese (Villarejo et al. 2001).¹¹ Alicia's feelings of vulnerability about comparisons to white women reflect racialization processes in California where body types like hers are not valued by the dominant society.

María illustrated a sense of bewilderment over the different expectations in the U.S.:

In Mexico, when you are socialized in a conservative way (*educado en una manera recatada*), well you don't go out much to the dances. You get married and you live your nice life, married with only your husband and that is what you believe. Later when you come here [U.S.], you expect more but you live in poverty and you worry about what others think about you.

In this new social context, and with such high proportions of men to women in the fields, the constraints imposed by kin or others can be transgressed. There are many opportunities for establishing sexual encounters, as Susana explained: "We all work in pairs and many times in the furrow right behind me, there is a man. The crews are not always only women; it depends on where there is work." Thus women get to know a great number of men and can establish personal relationships if they wish. The high demand for women's sexual favors is highly desirable for women like Susana: "It is difficult to resist so many temptations (*tantas tentaciones*). I have had various young men offer me, as the song says, 'the moon, the heavens and the stars' if I will spend some time with them. They are very lonely and have strong urges (*el instinto alto*)."

Women may also experience relative empowerment by working outside the household and earning their own money that provides resources and autonomy for pursuing their own interests. Women unaccustomed to such explicit attention by men may find the possibilities, especially in the context of anonymity, enticing. Gloria explained:

Our best people (*nuestra mejor raza*) are working in the fields. There are young men who are handsome and very strong (*guapos y fuertotes*), and sometimes are very solicitous and they promise love. Sometimes it is difficult to resist. And since many of them come from the small towns of Mexico, well one thinks that there won't be a problem, they can't have "those" problems such as AIDS. In addition, they are so alone; they don't know anyone here.

With little experience in negotiating such overwhelming possibilities, some women find themselves having unprotected sex. Esperanza elaborated on the opportunities for privacy for sexual encounters that had not been available to her in Mexico: "Here in the U.S. things are easier. There are motels, everyone has a car, and since one works, well you can escape and no one will notice. For that reason you have to take care of yourself, not show that you have been "in something," even your facial expression (*hasta de la expresión de la cara*), or else you will get stuck."

The new social context in which women remap the body is often less restrictive than it is in Mexico for these women. "Modernity" and its artifacts (work outside the home, their own income, credit cards, cars, motels, telephones, nightclubs, etc.) enable some women to subvert patriarchal mechanisms of control and to generate instances of counter hegemonic narratives. However, there were limitations to their empowerment and despite pushing the boundaries women often accepted some notions of being *mujeres decentes*. Women continue to experience some anxieties generated by the

traditional embodied norms and values *en el otro lado*. The expression of their sexual desires is often checked by the fear of being betrayed by some signs inscribed upon the body where the sanctions can be severe. In this sense, these women turn peripheral vision upon themselves and their deportment. They face a series of new opportunities for sexual encounters or relationships, and reconstruct how they conduct their bodies as they negotiate whether they were available for sexual relations or not. While many of these new possibilities would be faced if they had migrated from rural to urban sites in Mexico, they saw them as products of migration to the U.S. where *mexicano* communities provide a context highly different from Mexico.

Transgressing Borders: Purity and Risk

Despite their newfound sense of independence, engaging in heterosexual relations can be fraught with dangers for migrant Mexican women. Women of Mexican origin have disproportionately higher rates of STIs, especially HIV.¹² Research shows that Latinas have a particular epidemiology for contracting HIV: 46 percent of AIDS cases among Latinas are due to heterosexual contact with men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994) and women often are unaware of their risk status.¹³

One of the major risks experienced by migrant women is that their male partners may be involved in risky sexual behaviors. These risks include acquiring an STI by having unprotected sexual relations with women and men, including commercial sex workers who work at or near the camps, mainly during the peak of the harvest season.¹⁴ The high number of potential clients at the camps is highly attractive for the sex workers and their pimps (Organista 1996). In this scenario, there is a high proportion of single men who are lonely, have money and peer-pressure and few alternatives for amusement. In the face of surviving crossing the border (even worse when undocumented), vulnerability to HIV or other illnesses sometimes pales in comparison. Many migrant men do not have enough

knowledge about HIV/STIs and do not believe they concern them. For many farmworkers, AIDS is still seen as a gay or white problem (CAPS 2001a). The explanations of unsafe sex are complex and multifaceted, and include feelings of invulnerability, perceiving that unsafe sex is more pleasurable than safer sex, being depressed or sad, having conflicting allegiances with either racial or sexual identity, and using alcohol or other drugs (Kegeless et al. 1999).¹⁵

Married men may use commercial sex workers as well. Some of the women's partners traveled extensively bringing the crops to different parts of the country. In these trips, men may experience extramarital unprotected sexual practices. When returning to their spouses, they are unlikely to use condoms that would jeopardize their credibility as faithful spouses (Organista 1996). Further, the mobility of the farm worker population means that there is a close relationship between migrant status and the increase in HIV and AIDS in Mexico as well (Castañeda et al. 2001).

In this binational context, the epidemic has been concentrated mainly in men. Of those diagnosed with AIDS in Mexico, 86 percent is men who have sex with men, and there is a ratio is 6 men for every woman diagnosed with AIDS. When the analysis is based on sexual transmission alone (rather than through injection drug use or other means), the proportion is even higher—90.3 percent men and 9.7 percent women. Among the 25-34 year-old age group, AIDS represents the fourth cause of death for men and the seventh for women, and the rates of heterosexual transmission for women are expected to increase (Magis 2001). The number of deaths by AIDS for men in Mexico was 20 per 100,000 in 1996 while the number of deaths by AIDS for women was 2.5 per 100,000 in 1996. However, by 1998 the rate for men began to decline while the rate for women continued to increase (Magis et al. 2001). In California, the pattern is similar. Among those of Mexican-origin, 69 percent of AIDS cases is men between 20-40 years of age who have sex with men. Of these cases, 32 percent

were born in the U.S. and 68 percent were born in Mexico (California Office of AIDS 2000). Despite the increased numbers of women contracting HIV in Mexico and the U.S., there has been little research on the social context that place migrant women at risk.

Mexicanas in the U.S. have barriers to health care, including low incomes, low rates of medical insurance, language use (either predominantly Spanish or indigenous language use), and/or lack of transportation. Noncitizen Mexicanas, who either were tested themselves or know someone who was tested under the amnesty provisions of the Immigration Control and Reform Act, often fear they will be deported if they test positive for HIV (Romero and Argüelles 1993). Condom use is heavily influenced by Latino religious and cultural practices: one study indicated that 78 percent of the Latino respondents had never used a condom (Ryan 1988) while in another, 75 percent of Mexican female migrant workers reported not carrying condoms (Balls et al. 1998). Catholics are banned from using condoms because it is considered an "unnatural" form of contraception. Many Spanish-speaking (or indigenous) Latinos have trouble reading instructions on condom use.¹⁶ Further, condom use is often associated with extramarital sex or prostitution. The study notes, "[this linkage] makes the Spanish word for condom a vulgar term to both male and female Mexicans. In [one] study, women expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment about their partners' use of a condom" (Ryan 1988:1).

Women discussed these risks openly, well aware of the potential deadly consequences of their partners' behavior and that requesting that their partners to use condoms is unthinkable since within patriarchal discourse, the woman would be to blame. Irene said: "For me, it would be worse if my boyfriend thinks badly of me, that I am not "clean." I would rather not confront him." Margarita was starker: "It's male privilege (*el machismo*) to think that 'it won't happen to me and it won't happen to you because I'll take care of you. But in reality it can happen to anyone.'" During one focus group a

woman shared that she used condoms under the guise of contraception, even though the Catholic Church prohibited it. She advised other women to use condoms in this manner so as to protect themselves from STIs since it was socially more acceptable to men. Here condom use for contraception does not jeopardize women's "purity" because there is no assumption that she is having sex with multiple partners. In contrast, using condoms for prevention of HIV is threatening because of the link of prevention with pleasure and possibly more than one partner.

Mindful that the U.S. provides complex new freedoms and dangers to be negotiated, Marisela stated: "Here the struggle is different than the struggle we face in Mexico (*aquí la batalla es diferente que la en México*)." Gloria was clear about the risks of her new found independence, as well as the oscillation in her thinking: "What I do here I cannot do over there, and the risks that I face if I am discovered are not the same [she sighed]." Anonymity and less social control enables women to have more room to maneuver, even though social surveillance is still present through transnational social networks. Regardless of whether they remembered Mexico with nostalgia, relief at having left, or anxiety about what those *en el otro lado* would think, they compare their lives now to their previous lives.

Conclusion

The social inequalities in which migrant farmworkers live are inscribed upon their bodies, as seen in poor health indicators, and constitute a "political economy of risk" where women face particular dangers. Despite the enormous and valuable fruits of their labor, migrant farmworkers frequently are marginalized by society and are racialized and sexualized in the communities where they live and work. Clearly there is a critical need for higher wages, health insurance and better monitoring of working conditions that create the health problems noted here. The lack of enforcement of existing laws

preventing sexual harassment constitutes an important barrier for women farmworkers, pushing them into situations in which they are discriminated against as racialized women and forced to work in hostile environments. Further, there is dire need for more funding for clinics and community-based organizations so they can target women in their outreach efforts. Effective programs for HIV prevention among Mexican farmworkers must address the context of their lives as well as the interpersonal and socio-cultural factors that put them at risk for sexual harassment and the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections. We agree with Kelly (2000): "HIV behavioral research can only stop HIV infection when results of the research can be used to make applied programs better."

Apart from the changes in social policy and practice that would help women who work in agribusiness, Mexican women migrant farmworkers themselves are social actors. They develop strategies to protect themselves and cover their sexualized bodies while working in predominantly male environments, display them while socializing, or negotiate gendered expectations about sexuality and occasionally transgress notions of being *mujeres decentes*. They are mindful that California's agricultural regions are like "little Méxicos," social worlds that are predominantly *mexicano* and, simultaneously, profoundly different from Mexico. In the process, they construct complex identities that are shaped by powerful repressive discourses and express their own notions of desire. Reflecting on the patterns of gendered sexuality we have illustrated here, we find the metaphors of mapping and remapping useful to characterize how women are objectified, and how they construct and contest hegemonic discourses respectively. Women see the different perceptions and behaviors related to gender and sexuality as originating in new circumstances brought on by transnational migration. In this unstable and contested social climate, these women construct new subjectivities regarding their work sites, social lives, and their bodies.

Notes

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¹ In a survey of California farmworkers, Villarejo and his colleagues (2000) report that 42 percent of the sample live in dwellings shared by two or more households; 20 percent of those dwellings have no telephone service and 68 percent of the respondents have no assets in the United States.

² Only 15 percent of all Mexican migrants (2.1 million of 13.9 million total migrants) actually leave Mexico and move to the U.S. (Santos Preciado 2001).

³ The focus groups included a dialogic process designed to elicit women's views on the themes of changing gender expectations, sexuality, and women's vulnerability to STIs in the U.S. We screened a film about women's vulnerability to HIV in Mexico that served as a springboard for discussion of these issues for Mexican women in the U.S. We asked the women to honor confidentiality and allow each woman to take a turn speaking. The focus group generated a set of concepts for further exploration during the in-depth interviews with individuals. The ethnographic methodology also includes participant observation in communities where farmworkers live and work, including interviews with men on the production process. The quotations are from focus groups and interviews, and any names we use are

pseudonyms. For a discussion of focus group methodology and interviews, see Morgan (1993) Fontana and Frey (1994).

⁴ For research on farmworkers in general, see Griffith and Kissam (1995). For the little research on farm worker women, see de la Torre (1993) and Buss (1993).

⁵ Remittances, the third largest source of revenue for the Mexican economy, pay to maintain households in sending communities in Mexico (CONAPO 2000).

⁶ According to the Census Bureau (2001), there are about 8 million undocumented residents in the US. The U.S. Department of Justice (1997) estimated that 72 percent of the undocumented residents were of Latino origin. Approximately 40 percent of undocumented Latinos live in California. Mexicans are by far the largest undocumented population in the US comprising around 55 percent of the total undocumented population (U.S. Department of Justice 1997).

⁷ Agriculture is classified as one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. Farmworkers' life expectancy is estimated to be only 49 years. Some health concerns are clearly attributable to the occupational hazards of farm work, and include toxic chemical injuries, dermatitis, respiratory problems, dehydration and heat stroke, or urinary tract infections. Others stem from poverty, social isolation and poor living conditions, including diabetes, depression or substance abuse (Environmental Work Group 1987).

⁸ Farmworker children suffer from poor nutrition, which causes pre- and post-partum deaths, as well as anemia, extreme dental problems, and poor mental and physical development. Seventy three percent of migrant children are completely without health insurance (National Advisory Council on Migrant Health 1993).

⁹ For a full discussion and critique of this cultural master script, see Zavella (1997).

¹⁰ For a full discussion of this analysis along with ethnographic support, see Zavella (2001).

¹¹ For women 20-29, 12 percent of undocumented women and 45 percent of documented women are likely to be obese, have a Body Mass Index of 30 points or greater (Villarejo et al. 2000).

¹² According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (1994), by 1994 Latinos accounted for 17 percent of total cases of AIDS while comprising only 9 percent of the U.S. population. Also see Russel (1993), Ickovics and Rodin (1992), Mishra (et al. 1997).

¹³ In California, about 70 percent of Latinas/os are of Mexican origin. For further discussion of Latinas at risk for AIDS, see Amaro (1988), Argüelles and Rivero (1988), Romero and Argüelles (1993) Mays and Cochran (1988) Nyamathi and Vasquez (1989), Selik (et al. 1989), Singer (et al. 1990).

¹⁴ According to Almaguer (1991), same sex practice by heterosexual Mexican men is regarding with certain indulgence by Mexicans in Mexico and the U.S., as long as men play the role of the *activo* (penetrator).

¹⁵ Latino adolescents (male and female) are twice as likely as white adolescents to have misconceptions about the causal transmission of AIDS, and may be at greater risk of HIV infection as a consequence of engaging in unsafe sexual practices attributable to insufficient information about prevention. Among adult Latinos, those of Mexican origin are more likely to have less knowledge about HIV and AIDS, particularly the elderly and those with less than 12 years of school (DiClemente et al. 1988; Dawson and Hardy 1989; CAPS 2001).

¹⁶ Latinos have high rates of illiteracy: One-third of those between 15 and 45 self-report illiteracy in English and almost 40 percent report they are illiterate in Spanish. Further, for a variety of cultural and other reasons, Latinos are less likely to have reported use of condoms (Richwald et al. 1989; Romero and Argüelles 1993; CAPS 2001b).

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