

Mixteco Women on the Migration Route

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Siguiendo el viaje de algunas mujeres mixtecas que salieron de su pueblo y se instalaron, hasta ahora en Tijuana, aparece el dinamismo de la migración. Cambios como la adolescencia, el noviazgo, el casamiento o la unión, la llegada de los hijos y a veces la muerte, son sucesos teñidos por los vaivenes de la migración.

. . . Una vez que se sale del pueblo la vida cambia. O se encuentra novio, o se casa, o se tiene un hijo. Ya no es la misma que salió . . .

Doña Guadalupe Santillán

Back home it rains hard. That's why rivers overflow and bridges fall down. When our house was flattened, everything got soaked, totally destroyed, even the birth certificates.

I was born in San Miguel Aguacate, a district of Silacayoapan, in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. As a child I helped my parents pull the weeds in the field. Otherwise, I looked after the cows. I didn't last long in school, because the teacher hit me a lot, and I would spend a lot of time hiding under chairs.

I married at age 13. When I turned 17, I left San Miguel, traveling with my husband to Veracruz and Tres Valles Potrereros to cut sugar cane for Boss Manuel. I used to cut 120 or 125 bundles per week, and my husband, 80 or 85. They paid us 50 pesos for our combined work. Of course, the money was given to him. He was the man.

When my parents died, I left that man. He beat me a lot. I put up with him because of my parents. But, "It's over," I told myself — and grabbed my children and moved to Mexico City, and from there to Juárez. Along the way I would sell peanuts, seeds, candies, and apples. One

day my oldest son said to me, "Look mother, let's go to Tijuana. They say there is plenty of help for poor people there."

And here you have me in Tijuana telling you all this. Go back? No, I won't go back. Everything there is very sad. I tell my children, "If you want to return, go ahead — to each his own." My life is here.

*Doña Guadalupe Santillán*¹

The Mixteca region of Oaxaca still maintains the humble beauty of many of Mexico's indigenous regions — and also their poverty, erosion, uncultivated parcels of land, and old trucks that come and go loaded with migrants. Listening to the stories of Mixteco women who have migrated from their community, one sees in their faces the imprint of these landscapes. Doña Santillán's departure from home, though less common than that of men, is a familiar individual and cultural experience. Mixteco women do domestic work in middle and upper class homes in cities like Mexico City, Oaxaca, Puebla, and more recently, Guadalajara, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana. They also work as street vendors.

For a long time Mixtecos have been part of the labor migrations to agricultural fields in Veracruz, Morelos, and what could be called the northwestern agricultural strip of Mexico — Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California — and even further to the fields of California, Oregon, Wash-

¹These testimonies by Mixteco women who settled in the border city of Tijuana are not intended to be a unified portrait of the female migration from the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. In addition to expressing individual and often unique experiences, they reflect different sub-regions of Oaxaca. The majority of the families established in the Obrera neighborhood of Tijuana are from the Silacayoapan district, especially from the towns of San Jerónimo del Progreso, Santa María Natividad, and Nieves Ixpantepec, and in notably lesser proportion from the district of Huajuapán de León and Juxtlahuaca.

ington, Arizona, and occasionally, Idaho. Mixteco women use this route in lesser proportion than the men, and their experience of it differs markedly, for unlike most men, they usually travel in the company of a family member.

In migration, one's environment is continually changing — a picture that emerges in experiences narrated by some of the Mixteco women who left their towns to settle for the present in Tijuana. One's experiences of adolescence, engagement, marriage, birth, and death, are shaped by the to-and-fro activities of migration. To create their culture, Mixteco men and women migrants have combined urban and rural knowledge; they have spanned short and long cultural distances. In this versatile, regional, migrant culture, migration is a 'permanent event' that becomes part of life, not a brief experience that can be told as an adventure. For these migrants, adventure is all of life. In the shortest time, unexpected change can happen.

I married at the age of 14. My husband was 35. I did not love the unfortunate man — I was already too grown up, and he was from another town. But before, when a man asked for the hand of a girl and the mother said yes, there was no question. You had no choice but to marry.

I went with him to live in his town, but not for long because he was killed in the hills. He used to sell dried pepper that he would bring from Pinotepa Nacional. On his way back, he was attacked on the road by robbers. So, after 11 months I was back at home.

I stayed there for a while, and when I turned 16 an aunt took me to Mexico City to work. I took care of a woman who lived alone — I swept, washed, and ironed for her. When my oldest brother became widowed he came to get me, but my employer offered to raise my wages, and she gave him a tip. That's how I ended up staying longer with her. But then my mother

became ill, and then there was no choice. I had to return home to care for my brother's children and my mother.

Doña Elisa Hernández

Although the reasons a woman first migrates are different in each case, fairly constant factors are her youthfulness and a contact with another migrant that shapes her future. The majority of Mixteco women became migrants in their adolescence, just like the majority of all migrants in our country.

As far back as I can remember, my parents used to send us to haul water on a donkey from a distant river. In those days school was not mandatory like nowadays. Not at all! One was dedicated to keeping house — getting up early to make tortillas or going to the fields to help plant corn. That was the life there — corn, cows, and goats. When things went well we harvested a lot of corn. Otherwise we sold the animals.

My mother worked very hard. When there was a shortage of corn — as we have had in recent months without a good crop — my father would go to yoke the animal, while she bought or borrowed corn, carrying it on her back for three or four kilometers (two to two-and-a-half miles).

That's how it was until we, the children, grew up and began to make it on our own. My parents had never gone outside the town. My brother was the first, and then I followed. He went to Mexico City to work as a bricklayer, and my aunt got me a job with a lady in her house. I was able to visit home regularly.

I finally decided to leave home because it was very difficult for me. My mother would have me prepare six or seven kilos (13-15 pounds) of tortillas — there were about eight of us in the family — for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was too much. That's why one day I said, "No, I won't stay here any longer," and left.

Doña Paz Vera

In some cases, like that of Doña Paz Vera, migration is the alternative of choice, while in others it is a result of marriage.

At the age of 15 I met a man of 27. He was a migrant who traveled to and from the

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After years of struggling for a place to ply their trade, Mixteco vendors cleaned and rebuilt the fountain in the Plaza de Santa Cecilia. Today it is one of the major craft markets for border tourists in Tijuana. *Photo by Laura Velasco Ortiz*

Mixteco women vendors arrange their display on their cart in the Plaza de Santa Cecilia in Tijuana. *Photo by Laura Velasco Ortiz*



fields of Sinaloa . . . We dated for a year before I married him . . . when I was 17 years old, he went to the United States. He later returned and said to me, "This time we go together" . . . And we went to work in San Quintín, Baja California.

Doña Natalia Flores

But migration is also sometimes inherited, the destiny of progeny. For families with a migrant tradition, mobility is a fundamental strategy for survival. Children experience their parents' migration as personal and family destiny, integrating it into their lives as an inevitable part of the future.

I migrated when I was 14 years old, about five years ago, now. I left with my father and a younger brother. My mother could not come because she was nursing, and there was no one else to take care of the house. It took us a month to reach Tijuana because we left without money. My father would play the saxophone while my brother and I passed the hat. I am now married to a man I met here. He is from my town back in Oaxaca and works on the other side, the United States.

Doña Juana Flores

It could be said paradoxically that change is

a constant in these women's experience — change in residence, life cycle, and historical moment. These combine to shape the life of a woman who first leaves home under circumstances that bring together personal reasons, family ties, and misfortune.

Once you leave your hometown, life changes. You either find a boyfriend, get married, or have a child. You are not the same one that left.

Doña Guadalupe Santillán

In the course of migration unforeseen events take place. Guadalupe migrated for the first time to Mexico City, and later returned to her town, where she lived for some time. There she gave birth to a child and after a period again migrated to agricultural fields in the northwest:

After my return home from Mexico City I took care of my widowed brother's children. I spent seven years raising them until I married my second husband. I stayed three years with him and had three children. My husband migrated regularly to Culiacán until one day he found another woman and did not return. I was left alone with my children and my mother, without anyone to wait for. And so I also went to work in Culiacán. My children stayed home with my mother. In the fields I met another man. I started to live with him, and together we went to work in Obregón.

Doña Elisa Hernández

Migratory routes of Mixteco women are shaped by events of the life cycle. For example, marriage in the life of the young woman who migrated at 14 to do domestic work in Mexico City might cause her to choose a different migration alternative, perhaps to northern Mexico with her new husband, or with her children alone after a separation. The arrival of children coincides with a return to the place of origin. The growth of the children again changes women's migrations. When the children reach adolescence they usually get married, and then the women seem to stabilize themselves. They settle for longer periods, and like their parents, care for their grandchildren while sons and daughters migrate to California or Baja California.

Constant migration makes 'place of destination' a relative concept — referring to a month in Mexico City, another in Culiacán, others on the coast of Hermosillo, afterwards a few years in Tijuana, or many more in the United States. But the 'final destination' seems to be a Mixteco's own place of origin. This seems the principal ethnic feature of this migratory movement: the constant link with the community of origin.

In this venture women play a notable role. By preserving the home, whether in their Mixteca towns or in intermediate destinations — Mexico City, Ensenada, Tijuana — they make it possible for other members of the family, men and women, to achieve the mobility necessary for travel on old routes or new ones. Their keeping of the home fires includes not only awaiting and welcoming, but also supporting family members who remain at home.

Tijuana is one such migrant home base maintained by women at an intermediate destination. Its location on the Mexico-United States border allows cross-border mobility for some family members, especially the men, to travel between the agricultural fields in northern Mexico and southwestern United States. Mixteco women in Tijuana, in domestic roles and as wage earners, support the growth of the largest ethnic group that settled in Baja California.

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