
Original Article

Coming and going: Mexican women guestworkers in the US crab industry

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Abstract Recruitment of female guestworkers by the US seafood processing industry provides Mexican women with opportunities to support their families financially through legal seasonal labor migration at the cost of family separation. Based on interviews with workers and former workers from crab processing plants in the rural Southeast, I find that family contexts, isolated employment conditions, and precarious legal status shape possibilities for permanent settlement. Despite classification as “temporary nonimmigrants,” crab pickers, or *jaiberas*, use seasonal migration to the United States as a long-term strategy to support families in Mexico and are held in temporary positions in both locations. These arrangements subject *jaiberas* to systems of social control that have important policy implications regarding the labor and family rights of so-called unskilled workers in the H-2 program.

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Guestworker programs have long been structured so that employers and receiving states benefit from the labor of workers from less developed countries without supporting the welfare of their families who must remain across borders. This form of managed migration renders guestworkers “perfect immigrants” in the eyes of the state (Hahamovitch 2003, 73). Under US post-World War II programs that recruited agricultural workers from Mexico and the



Caribbean, family reunification was prohibited to discourage the permanent settlement of male workers (Hahamovitch 2003). Contemporary guestworker programs favor married workers who have spouses and children in their countries of origin to deter settlement and as a mechanism of social control used by employers (Basok 2000; Preibisch 2004; Schmalzbauer 2015).

Unlike historic guestworker programs that excluded women for fear that they would bring or start families in the United States (Hahamovitch 2003, 2011), contemporary guestworker programs depend on women's transnational family structures to hold them in marginalized positions in the labor force (Mannon et al. 2012). Since the late twentieth century, women have been increasingly incorporated into global guestworker streams (Boyd and Taylor 1986; Hahamovitch 2003; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010; Mannon et al. 2012). In addition to service jobs, women have been recruited for agricultural and production work in Canada, Europe, and the United States (Griffith 2006; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010; Mannon et al. 2012).

In this article, I explore the conditions under which Mexican women guestworkers participate in the US H-2B program and how these experiences intersect with their positions as transnational mothers and wives to hold them in an ongoing state of temporary membership in the United States. Temporary legal status, combined with transnational motherhood status and isolated employment and living conditions, constrain female crab workers, who call themselves *jaiberas*, to long-term, liminal positions in the United States in which there are few opportunities for settlement. These conditions are exacerbated by incorporation in rural new destination communities in which Latina migrants have underdeveloped social networks. Although women are inhibited from and uninterested in permanent incorporation in the United States, the long periods of time spent working there constrain their roles as mothers and wives in Mexico. They are held in limbo – leading lives in which they are constantly “coming and going.” However, negative cases suggest that opportunities for settlement are nuanced, depending on family structure: women without husbands and children sometimes settle permanently in these coastal communities. This case study of an understudied population of migrant workers contributes to scholarship on the gendered nature of managed migration, implications of “liminal” legality (Menjívar 2006), and women's labor force incorporation in new destinations.

From “Pickers” to *Jaiberas*: Mexican Women's Incorporation in Crab Processing

The US H-2 visa classification is structured to appeal to employers' needs for seasonal labor, while discouraging the permanent settlement of workers. Unlike the Bracero guestworker program, which was a bilateral agreement between

Mexico and the United States (Cohen 2011), the H-2 program is a US visa classification – there are no intergovernmental agreements with sending countries. Under this arrangement, employers, more than the state, are responsible for the management of guestworkers, essentially privatizing control of the program (Hahamovitch 2011; Griffith 2014).

H-2 is a temporary, “nonimmigrant” classification, divided into two types: H-2A for agricultural work and H-2B for nonagricultural work, such as food processing. The H-2 program allows employers to hire temporary labor from eligible countries if they can prove there are not enough US workers “able, willing, qualified, and available” (US Department of Labor 2014). Visa holders may work only for the employer listed on their visa petition, and must prove “compelling ties” to their home country to demonstrate intent to return (US Department of State 2015).

Since the late 1980s, employers in the blue crab processing industry have used H-2B visas to recruit mostly female, Mexican workers to work in their plants (Griffith 2006). This industry is concentrated in small, rural communities along the Atlantic coast in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, which are three of the top ten states for H-2B certifications (US Department of Labor 2013). Most women in the crab processing industry are “pickers,” who extract meat from blue crabs to be processed and packaged.

Crab picking has historically been a female job, but the industry’s labor force has transitioned from native-born African American women to Mexican women. Black women were largely replaced by Mexican women, when, according to David Griffith (2006, 46), employers claimed there were no longer enough native-born workers willing to fill the jobs, attributing the labor shortage to black women’s reliance on entitlement programs. But African American women explained they left because of age, health problems, to care for family, or because they found better and more stable jobs in service industries. Former workers also claimed that the introduction of migrant workers increased workplace competition and reduced the number of crabs available to pick. In addition, community college enrollment in these regions increased, which suggests younger workers found new sources of upward mobility outside the plants, which had offered little or no opportunity for advancement (Griffith 2006). Griffith also suspects that younger workers were dissuaded by workplace discipline, which “became more rigid with the arrival of foreign workers.” African American workers reported that employers, who previously allowed for flexible scheduling, became more demanding and threatened replacement by Mexican workers (Griffith 2006, 56–57).

Crab processing employers developed labor recruitment networks in Sinaloa, Mexico, which is also home to a seafood processing industry. This allowed employers to hire workers who were experienced but more easily controlled than native-born workers. Over time, formal recruitment via labor intermediaries gave way to referrals through social networks. Most women told me they



learned about jobs from their female relatives, friends, and neighbors. To get the jobs, labor recruiters usually required them to have some experience before coming, and most had worked as *jaiberas* in Mexico.

Several scholars have found that immigrant workers, especially women, are attractive to US employers because of their marginalized social and legal positions in the United States. Employers favor workers with “soft skills,” such as motivation and strong work ethic, which often have coded meanings for exploitability on the basis of race/ethnicity, nativity, legal status, and gender. These workers’ social locations create conditions under which they have few labor force opportunities, are willing to work for the lowest wages, and are more subordinate than native-born employees (Espiritu 1997; Waters 1999; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Vernon Briggs (1986, 1001) argues that the true intention of guestworker programs is not to fill labor shortages but to provide employers with labor made “docile” by conditions in which workers have little control.

Crab picking is piecework: women told me they earn approximately \$2.30 per pound of crabmeat. The Economic Policy Institute has demonstrated that employers use the H-2B program as a way to depress wages (Costa 2011). Despite holding visas, guestworkers’ labor market outcomes are on par with or worse than those of unauthorized workers (Apgar 2015). Because the H-2 program ties workers to a single employer, guestworkers have less occupational mobility than unauthorized worker who may find opportunities to “job jump” (Hagan et al. 2011; Apgar 2015). Mexican women in the US crab industry enter these jobs to provide better lives for their children, yet this financial support comes at the cost of a seven- to eight-month separation from their families and the burden of being unable to provide emotional support to families from a distance (Contreras and Griffith 2012).

Transnational Incorporation, Gender, and Family

Like men (Cohen 2011; Schmalzbauer 2015), women often become labor migrants because local labor markets do not provide opportunities for them to adequately support their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001). Participating in guestworker programs often entails a prolonged separation from family that causes suffering for both men and women (Hahamovitch 2011; Contreras and Griffith 2012; Schmalzbauer 2015). Men’s participation in guestworker migration reinforces a traditional gendered division of labor in Mexican families, which is often reproduced across generations (Schmalzbauer 2015). Yet women’s participation in transnational labor arrangements contradicts the expectations of wives and mothers as providers of emotional labor to their families (Hochschild 1979; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Dreby 2006). Pulled between traditional ideals of motherhood and

the need to provide for families economically, transnational mothers “are initiating separations of space and time from their communities of origin, homes, children, and – sometimes – husbands. In doing so, they must cope with stigma, guilt, and criticism from others” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 552). Mothers reconcile these transgressions with the knowledge that their work allows them to provide for their children’s basic needs (Parreñas 2001).

For many transnational mothers, such as domestic workers, undocumented status, coupled with limited financial resources, inhibits movement across an increasingly militarized US-Mexico border (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Schmalzbauer 2004; Menjívar 2006). Despite intentions to return home permanently, many transnational mothers have settled in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001). In contrast, H-2B workers’ visas require their return to Mexico at the end of each season. Therefore, they avoid the prolonged family separation experienced by undocumented women. Based on women’s accounts of their experiences as guestworkers, I argue that seasonal reunification with family combined with strict visa regulations maintain relationships that strengthen emotional ties in Mexico and discourage incorporation and settlement in receiving communities.

Jaiberas in the Rural South

My data consist of interviews with twenty current and two former *jaiberas*. I conducted interviews with current *jaiberas* in “Springville,”¹ North Carolina, and “Riverview,” Virginia. Workers in both sites live in employer-provided housing. H-2B employers are not obligated to provide free housing to workers, so workers pay rent, which is deducted from their paychecks. Workers in both plants rely primarily on employers to provide Sunday bus trips to a nearby Wal-Mart and, sometimes, a Mexican *tienda*. Dependence on employers for work, housing and transportation indicates that *jaiberas* live under conditions of intense control that are indicative of a total institution (Goffman 1961; Griffith 2006). Erving Goffman (1961) posits that inhabitants of total institutions (in this case, workers) lose autonomy over daily decisions to those in control of the institutions (in this case, employers), because of their dependence on the institution for basic needs and isolation from the world outside the institution. Workers are especially vulnerable to employer control because their contracts tie them to a single employer.

The communities in which these institutions are situated are small, rural, and have few Latina/o residents. Springville has a population of approximately five hundred, with a racial composition that is 52 per cent white and 43 per cent black. There are fifteen self-identified Hispanics.² Workers pay \$100 per month for housing in a former elementary school. They share dormitory-style bedrooms in converted classrooms, communal bathrooms, the cafeteria kitchen,

1 All names of people and places are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted during 2012 and 2013.

2 The US Census’ definition of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. To protect the privacy of participants, I do not include citations for these Census profiles.



and a small laundry room. Workers rely on employers for transportation for most of their shopping, but live within walking distance to a small supermarket and two dollar stores.

There are no census data available for Riverview, because it is an unincorporated community.³ Census data for the county in which Riverview is situated list a population of 12,346 people across 191 miles. Seventy-three per cent of residents are white, 25 per cent are black, and 3 per cent identify as Hispanic. The women I interviewed in Riverview live in old two-story white farmhouses with screened-in porches set against a landscape of soybean fields. Workers pay \$33 per week for rent, and two to three workers share a bedroom. Their houses are located too far to walk to the nearby dollar store or other establishments.

My sample consists of thirteen women from Springville, seven women from Riverview, and two former *jaiberas* who left the industry and settled permanently in an eastern North Carolina city. Most women were in their forties; the youngest was thirty-four and the oldest was sixty-five. All but two interviewees had children, supporting findings that high proportions of H-2 workers are parents (Griffith 2006; Contreras and Griffith 2012; Griffith and Contreras 2014; Schmalzbauer 2015). Almost two-thirds of the current workers were married. All interviewees were from Sinaloa, Mexico. On average, *jaiberas* had worked in the industry about thirteen years. Of twenty current *jaiberas*, thirteen had been working in the United States for at least ten years and five had been working for twenty years or more, indicating that labor migration is a long-term strategy, and that they have been coping with family separation for many years.

I used an inductive, grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) for data collection and analysis. I began interviewing current workers in Springville in fall 2012, continuing into the summer 2013 season. At this point, I added interviews with workers in Riverview, and the two former workers in eastern North Carolina. I used a convenience sampling strategy among the current worker population at both plants because the populations in the plants were small (thirty-five to forty people) and I wanted to interview as many workers as possible. I used snowball sampling for the former workers, a common strategy for finding hard-to-reach populations (Morgan 2008). I interviewed all current workers during nonworking hours at their employer-provided housing.

Interviews were semi structured with primarily open-ended questions about labor history in Mexico, migration decisions, social and work experiences in the United States, transnational family arrangements, future plans, and settlement intentions. I discussed the same topics with former workers, as well as their decisions to leave the industry, and labor and settlement experiences after leaving. I conducted all interviews in Spanish, with one exception.⁴ All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After meeting with interviewees, I wrote observational field notes and “notes on notes” (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Following grounded theory, I coded notes and transcripts

3 According to the US Geological Survey Geographic Names Information System, an unincorporated community is a populated place that is not a census-designated or incorporated place having an official federally recognized name.

4 Carol, a former worker, is fluent in English.

drawing upon themes that emerged from the data. As patterns emerged, I began using analytic codes and drafted analytic memos (Charmaz 2006). All translations are my own.

Coping with “Here” and “There”: Women’s Circular Migration

“One spends more time here [in the United States] than there [in Mexico]. We’re here for seven months. It’s a long time.” –Teresa, 56, Springville

Overwhelmingly, workers told me they migrated to support a better life for their children. Their earnings fund housing improvements, education, adult children’s expenses, and generally helping “*sacarlos adelante*” (to get ahead). In this way, they associate work with the moral obligations of motherhood. This financial support, however, comes at the cost of consistent periods of family separation. Employers do not allow mothers to bring their children with them. As Leticia told me, “Si no, todos tuviéramos todos los plebes aquí.” (Otherwise, we would all have all our kids here.) As Teresa indicates above, the time spent apart from family in Mexico is a difficult and salient part of *jaiberas’* US experience. Yet, as others have found (Schmalzbauer 2015), these mothers perceive that migrating through the H-2 program is a safer and more secure option than migrating undocumented, and know that they are guaranteed a safe return home at the end of each season.

In most cases, the desire to return to family deters women from staying in the United States beyond the time they are employed by the crab plant. These women, therefore, not only live temporarily in the United States, but also in their home country. They can’t stay in Mexico because they must support their families financially and are able to earn more in the United States, but they can’t settle permanently in the United States because their visas prohibit it, and because their families are in Mexico.

This tension of living temporarily in two worlds became apparent in my interview with Juana, who had been working seasonally in the United States for twenty-four years. Juana’s daughter had a college degree, but was unable to find work in Mexico. When I asked whether her daughter had considered coming to Springville, Juana responded,

No. She says that it’s *muy pesado* (very heavy). To come [to the US] is to be going and coming. She says, “There’s no future because you’re six months here and six months there. What a joke that is. Where are you going to make your life – here or there?” *Tiene razón* (She’s got a point). She’s completely right because well, where is the future located for us? Coming



and going? For the rest of our lives? Until we can't? Or until they stop bringing us?

Juana's account highlights the uncertainty and dislocation seasonal labor migrants face while working in a foreign country to support a life in one's home country. Her experience is representative of the ways migrant women are situated at social, cultural, and geographic "borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987). Although she is working to support a life in Mexico, her periodic incorporation in the United States inhibits her ability to fully engage in this life. Women like Juana live not only at the geographic border of the United States and Mexico, but also at the border of supporting families financially and being present physically and emotionally.

Negotiating migration decisions

Women's accounts indicate that their work abroad is critical to their families' well-being. Most come from communities where people work in seasonal agricultural and fishing jobs, in which wages are too low to support their families. *Jaiberas* explained that participating in the H-2B program allows their families to diversify sources of income and circumvent employment shortages. This is important because of the contingent nature of the seasonal work in which they and their husbands are concentrated in Mexico: women explained that the agricultural and fishing seasons typically end around the same time that the US seafood-processing season begins, in early spring. Others' husbands were unable to work because of illnesses, disabilities, or incarceration.

Despite household economic need, several married women indicate their husbands' reluctance toward their migration. When recounting how they made migration decisions, these women often frame themselves in traditional gender roles by expressing that they needed their husbands' permission to work in the United States and describe their work as "helping" husbands. For example, Verónica, thirty-four, came to North Carolina to work as a *jaibera* for the first time at age eighteen when she heard from some women in her community that she could earn more as a *jaibera* than working in *el campo* (the fields) in Mexico. She told me how she made this decision with her husband: "The economy wasn't very good, aside from that we were recently married, and we said, 'Well to start to have our own things,' and I said, 'Well I'll go and I'll help you.'"

Verónica worked in agricultural jobs in Mexico since she was young, but implied that earning was primarily her husband's responsibility and that she worked to "help him with the expenses." She also told me that her husband exercised authority over her decision to migrate: "We came to an agreement, because if he hadn't given me permission, I wouldn't come. So he gave me

permission and I came.” Verónica took a break from migration for six years, but came back to work in the United States when her husband left and no longer supported their children. She told me she works to provide for them and pay for their studies. Verónica’s decision-making was part of a household strategy to maximize earnings: first, as part of a young couple seeking to create a home, and later as a single mother, left to provide for her children.

Many women’s accounts indicate that they are able to circumvent husbands’ authority. While some women superficially subscribe to patriarchal ideologies, their actions demonstrate resistance to them. For instance, some women whose husbands didn’t want them to come initially came anyway. Others whose husbands wanted them to stop migrating continued to come. In many cases, women indicated that their husbands’ *macho* reluctance was supplanted by financial need. Vanesa told me that she first wanted to come to the United States before her children were born but that, “my husband didn’t allow me, because we were recently married. I’m talking about twenty years back, I wanted to come but he didn’t let me.”

When I asked Vanesa what changed her husband’s mind, she explained, “There’s not enough [work] there [in Mexico]. We were both working, but it wasn’t enough and since now it’s much more difficult, there’s no work right now, and we [women] have this opportunity to come here and we come. And the men stay there and get a little work here and there,... but it’s not like here, where you work, and work, and work.” Accounts like Vanesa’s show that for some husbands, letting wives migrate to work in the United States was a last resort. Her husband’s work is precarious, while US migration provides her an opportunity to support her family.

Leticia also experienced tension over her husband’s reluctance to allow her to migrate. Leticia told me that when her children were young, he didn’t want her to come, but eventually, she told me she came anyway: “I just said, ‘I’m going to get the passport, because I’m going to go.’ But one always has to check with him.” Leticia acted independently of her husband’s wishes – however, she still frames the event through a lens of spousal permission.

As Verónica’s above account indicates, when men leave, single women may become more inclined toward migration as they are left to become the sole providers of their household. For example, Rosalia’s husband would not allow her to migrate when they were married, but she came after she and her husband separated:

Now that I was alone, I had to find something because a person on their own, with the work in Mexico, it’s not enough to sustain the house, to buy clothing and all of that. ... It’s not enough for anything. [After we separated], he didn’t help me anymore with the children. I had to work in order to put food on the table. In Mexico they don’t require that fathers help you.



Migration decisions are influenced by economic circumstances and embedded in the gendered relationships of households. Married women negotiate and overcome male authority when deciding to migrate, and men, in turn, may concede patriarchal authority when they are unable to provide for their families because of labor market or health constraints. Single women may decide to migrate when their husbands stop providing financial support for their children and no longer have the authority to prevent their migration. In line with earlier studies of Mexican women's migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992, 1994), these findings indicate that male authority is sometimes a gatekeeper for women's labor migration, but suggest that under certain conditions, women are able to subvert this authority.

Making sacrifices: Coping with family separation

Family support is an impetus for initiation into migration and perpetuates migration over many years. For example, Leticia had been migrating for thirteen years. She had a daughter in university and a son in high school. When I asked Leticia whether she intended to continue migrating, she told me, "I say that as long as they bring me I will keep coming, until my children graduate. Until they get their degrees and practice [a profession]. And then when they graduate, then [I'll] stop coming." The duration of women's labor migration starts and ends with family need. Several women reported that their work in the United States allowed them to send their children to college, indicating that their sacrifice may allow for some intergenerational mobility, but they also acknowledged that labor market opportunities were few, even with college degrees. Still other women's daughters entered the same pattern of guestworker migration, suggesting, like others (Griffith 2006; Schmalzbauer 2015) that this labor is reproduced across generations.

I find that women reconcile their absences with the financial support they provide. Yet women feel this arrangement conflicts with their roles as mothers. When I asked women what their experiences were like when they first arrived in the United States, the most common theme discussed was the difficulty of leaving children behind. At the same time, women felt that working in the United States was necessary for their children's well-being, as Claudia indicates:

The first year that I came I suffered a lot, because I had never left my children. And when I came here it was really hard, really difficult that I left them. But one comes here because back home there's hardly any work. And the people who do work, well they hardly pay them anything it's not enough for anything. That's why one comes. But time passes, and one gets used to being here. You start getting used to the idea of being far from your children. But yes, one suffers a lot.



In their absence, these women left their children and home in the care of female kin, elder daughters, and husbands. Female kin, including mothers, sisters, and older daughters were especially important for single mothers. For example, Verónica, whose husband left when her two children were eleven and nine years old, relies on her mother to care for her children while she is away: “She is my strong arm, because what would I do if I didn’t have her? I couldn’t come [to the United States], because of my children. Who would I leave them with? Better than anything, it’s best that she takes care of them. There’s no one else besides her.” These “other mothers” make it possible for single mothers to migrate (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Schmalzbauer 2004).

Married women typically had husbands remaining in Mexico to care for children. Women expressed that learning to care for young children and do housework challenged husbands’ typical household roles. Victoria first started migrating when her youngest daughter was one-year-old, and her husband’s new responsibilities as the caregiver for a baby were challenging.

The first time I came, [my husband] said that at night when I didn’t come back, he found it really hard. Because he remembered that I wasn’t there and he didn’t know how to take care of the children, because he hardly ever did it. Because he dedicated himself to work and I took care of them. For him it was really difficult, but he adapted too, because he has a lot of patience. My little girl, I left her when she was one-year-old. He had to learn to change her diapers, to bathe her. And so for him it was a drastic change: washing slab floors, putting clothes in the washing machine. But he realized that the first year, I didn’t do a lot, but I built one room [in the house], and the next year another room. Every year when I come I put new furniture in the house, I pay for my children’s studies, I do something in my house.

Victoria’s absence forced her husband to take on new household roles, which he reconciled with the home improvements and other financial support she was able to provide. Victoria told me that until the previous year, she would resume housework responsibilities during her seasonal return. However, the past winter when she returned, her husband began helping her: “He told me, ‘When I’m here by myself I do it, so when my wife is here, why not help her?’ And yes, he helps me now.”

Her account indicates that over time, some men may grow more accepting of women’s roles as primary earners, and become more willing to do the housework previously considered to be only a woman’s role. However, this should be interpreted with caution, as I did not observe households in the sending country. Further, Hughes (2014) finds that female guestworkers’ isolation from the host society and focus on return migration inhibit “social



remittances” such as the transmission of egalitarian gender norms to communities of origin.

Because men usually continue to work outside the home in Mexico, some women told me that older daughters stepped in to help run the household. For example, when Teresa’s children were young, her thirteen-year-old daughter was left in charge of the house:

A daughter of mine, a thirteen-year-old kid, was the one who took care of [the other children]. It was really hard for her, and for me, because one comes here and you know that they’re little, and well, they don’t have anyone else to care for them besides their father – but their dad was working all day. He was only with them at night. ... She did everything in the house.

Daughters were often expected to take care of cooking, cleaning, and other housework while their fathers were at work. Therefore, women’s absences not only affect adult family members who care for the children, but also influence expectations of children themselves. When men are guestworkers, their absences reinforce a traditional gendered division of family labor (Schmalzbauer 2015). In some ways, women’s absences challenge the traditional division of labor, as suggested by Victoria. But like other scholars (Dreby 2006), I find that these transnational mothers still feel responsible for the emotional labor of families.

Prolonged absences over several years leave mothers feeling guilty. They cannot provide the care and support to their children that they feel is their motherly duty and miss out on formative years. Isabela, who has been migrating to work in Riverview for ten years, told me through tears, “It’s always difficult. Because you could say that, even though your children have grown, you didn’t have the opportunity to enjoy them. I lost one son to drugs. My daughters married. I couldn’t enjoy them during their single years and it’s been difficult. It’s very difficult.” Isabela later told me that she feels responsible for her son’s drug use because she was absent while he was growing up. Isabela’s children are now grown, but she feels the same dislocation being separated from her grandchildren.

Transnational parents are able to maintain contact with their families through advances in communication technology, which have made international phone calls and messaging increasingly affordable (Carling et al. 2012; Peng and Wong 2013). Regular communication can serve as a reminder of family separation, and may pressure women to engage in intensive mothering from abroad (Peng and Wong 2013). I find that some women reconcile their absences through attempts to maintain their nurturer roles from a distance. This communication is comforting for women, and keeps them oriented toward families in Mexico.



5 However, this was contingent on access to phone cards, which were not always available.

Most *jaiberas* own cell phones and purchase phone cards to call home regularly: this varies from weekly calls to multiple calls each day.⁵ Some send text messages to stay in touch. Cellular communication keeps *jaiberas* abreast of the daily experiences of family members, from knowing what the weather is in Sinaloa to providing parental guidance and making household decisions across borders.

Cristina, a mother of four, explained: “We talk almost daily. It’s as if one were back in Mexico.” Victoria engages with her children through texts and phone calls throughout the day:

My daughters send me messages every day: “Mamá, how did you sleep?” I answer them and when I go to work, when I leave for a lunch break, I call them for four or five minutes. “How are you, how did you sleep, have you eaten yet?” And they tell me “we’re fine,” and things like that. When I leave work in the afternoon I call home and we talk, “How are you? How was school? Did you clean the house?” Or sometimes my daughter says, “Hey Mom, I want to make this recipe. Tell us how.” And I tell her or “Go visit your grandmother, how is she doing?” Like that.

Victoria also told me that she discusses parental strategies, such as how to handle discipline, with her husband over the phone.

In addition to phone communication, *jaiberas*’ regular returns to Mexico maintain relationships that strengthen emotional ties to the sending community and families, and ease women’s guilt about their seasonal absences. Leticia, for example, was torn between her prospects for earning in the United States and her desire to be with her children, but said that at least she could see her children during her seasonal return to Mexico each year: “[Living here] is okay because we come to work, we come to earn, but I’d like to be there [in Mexico] because of my children. But it’s okay here, it’s only a time, seven months, and then at seven months our boss tells us that we can pick a date to go home.”

These accounts demonstrate that by recruiting transnational mothers, the H-2B program has been successful at receiving productive labor while avoiding responsibilities related to the reproduction of that labor force (Burawoy 1976). The strict regulation of the program keeps women continually returning to Mexico and prevents family reunification in the United States. Women’s feeling that their US incorporation is temporary is exacerbated by conditions of relative isolation and lack of access to networks in the United States, and their ability to retain ties to their families through communication and regular return. These factors intersect to maintain women’s orientation toward return migration, rather than settlement.



Possibilities for settlement

Legal restrictions, transnational motherhood status, and isolated contexts of reception render US settlement unrealistic for many *jaiberas*. Workers with children in Mexico indicated little desire to spend time in the United States beyond the months they were contracted to work, and most indicated that eventually, they will return to Mexico permanently. I asked Juana, who has extended family in Texas and New Mexico if she had ever thought about staying in the United States. She responded, “No. Because to stay here I would be without my children. No. It’s a long time to leave them alone and then to stay. No. I’ve never thought about it. It’s never crossed my mind.” Juana’s account shows that not only is settlement unappealing – it is not an option. Motherhood status in Mexico trumps weaker family ties that might allow her to stay in the United States. Isabela, whose husband, four children, and grandchildren live in Mexico, explained that she would not consider staying in the United States:

No, because my family is there. I can’t leave my family. I leave them for months, but no. Because of them – no, no. And because I’ve always said that the United States is a nice country, it’s a very nice country, I don’t have anything to complain about because it’s all fine, but what happens is that here you live alone, and there, well, your family is there [in Mexico].

Her account makes it clear that her disinterest in US settlement is because of family separation. Women also mentioned that bringing minor children to the United States unauthorized would be a formidable risk because of the dangers associated with crossing.

Attitudes toward settlement are also impacted by lack of access to networks, resources, and information in the relatively isolated and rural workplaces and communities in which *jaiberas* live that might give them opportunities to stay. Some workers have social ties outside the plant, but most workers spend their time only with other *jaiberas*, do not learn English, and lack access to networks outside of contracted coworkers. When I asked workers about interactions with people outside of the plant, most workers gave me responses similar to Laura’s: “Since we don’t go out anywhere, we don’t know anyone.”

Workers rely on social networks to get crab jobs in the United States, but these networks often do not extend beyond the plant. Isolated workplaces and social incorporation leave immigrant workers more vulnerable to employer control and with fewer opportunities to form social ties that are necessary for occupational mobility and permanent settlement (Hagan 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Deeb-Sossa and Bickham-Mendez 2008; Pfeffer and Parra 2009). In addition, permanent settlement often requires work that is stable and

nonseasonal (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Crab processing work is seasonal and precarious within seasons and from year to year.

However, negative cases suggest that some women do find pathways to settlement and occupational mobility in the United States. Women's accounts of colleagues who have stayed, and interviews with two former workers, demonstrate how some workers find a path to US settlement by overstaying visas and/or marrying men they meet in the United States. Griffith and Contreras (2014) also describe how former H-2B workers sometimes end up breaking their contracts and becoming active in local communities in eastern North Carolina. Those who stayed entered under different circumstances: often, single and without children. They faced fewer constraints to settlement and sometimes started families in the United States.

For instance, Isabela told me about a former colleague who married a US citizen and settled in North Carolina: "For example, Maria is a co-worker who came to work in crab but she went to the meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. It was there that that [she and her husband] met in a meeting." Isabela then compared this to her own and other colleagues' conditions as women with families in Mexico: "Those of us here are here thanks to God and with the commitment of marriage, respecting this position [being married], which my husband also has." Women like Isabela come to the United States with the understanding that they will return to husbands and family in Mexico. These accounts indicate how the social locations of workers who settle in the United States differ from those who remain as temporary guestworkers.

I interviewed two former *jaiberas* who now have permanent legal status, Elba and Carol. They came to work in the crab industry without the commitments that Isabela discussed. Their narratives provide further insight into the ways marital, motherhood, and legal status either constrain or facilitate United States settlement. Elba worked as a *jaibera* after she had spent several years working in California and gained US residency. She was unmarried and had no children when she came to work in North Carolina. After a few months at the plant, she was unhappy with the conditions and decided to leave: "I told my boss, 'You know what? This job isn't for me. ... I don't want this life. I'm leaving here.'" She found a job at another plant, which she learned about from a Mexican man. When that plant closed, Elba opened her own business, a Mexican *tienda*, and later met a Mexican man with whom she had two children.

Because she arrived in the United States as a permanent resident, Elba was not vulnerable to the constraints of the H-2B visa. Instead of feeling pressured to support a family in Mexico, Elba formed her family in the United States. Her sons are US citizens, and she has no plans to return to Mexico: "I love it here. People ask me, 'Why don't you go back to Mexico? Isn't life better there?' 'Noo,' I say, 'I would not take away the opportunity for my children to study here.' As long as I can stay here, I'll be here." Unlike the *jaiberas* whose children



keep them oriented toward Mexico, Elba's children keep her anchored in the United States.

Carol came to work in North Carolina as a university student. She was single, had no children, and told me she came as an opportunity to learn English. After two years working in a different plant, Carol was contracted to work in Springville, together with her sister. During her first month in Springville, she told me there was no work, living conditions were reprehensible, and that workers were overcharged for transportation and visas:

I tell you I just held on for a month and I left. When I finally said "I'm gone!" was when they came and gave us the prices of the stuff that we had to pay. The transportation and the visas and all that stuff. When I saw those prices, they inflated so much! Because one year before, I did all that,⁶ so I knew the price of everything. To me it wasn't worth it and I left.

6 Carol worked as a recruiter for a previous boss and was responsible for arranging transportation and documents for the other workers.

Carol broke her contract, left her H-2B employer, and became undocumented. She found a new job through Steve, a US citizen she met in Springville. Her sister, a mother with children in Mexico, stayed for the season in Springville, but later returned to Mexico permanently. Although they later separated, Carol married Steve and eventually gained citizenship. Several years later, she studied at a community college and opened a business that caters to the local Latina/o community. She hopes to earn a bachelor's degree and become a CPA.

Although two cases are not generalizable to the population of guestworkers, Elba and Carol's accounts suggest how legal contexts intersect with gendered family arrangements to influence women's work experiences and settlement intentions. Women's status as wives and mothers are salient factors in determining the extent to which they incorporate in the United States. Women who come while single and without children may have opportunities to leave jobs where they're unhappy, find new jobs in other cities through the formation of "weak" social ties (Granovetter 1973), and form families in the United States. On the other hand, women who make commitments to return home to families in Mexico occupy a liminal position in the United States. Although they spend three-quarters of many years working there, they have few intentions to stay, and stay oriented toward family in Mexico.

I discussed with the *jaiberas* why they thought employers preferred women for this work, rather than men. Some women attributed it to physical characteristics, but other women suggested that women were more responsible than men. Maribel, a *jaibera* in Riverview, explained: "Women are more responsible for the job. This is what I think. Men are more disposed to vice and they drink. All of the women have their children, to whom they send money, so what they want is to work to send [money] to their families, a little bit of money so that they can survive there [in Mexico]." This responsibility to transnational family holds women in long-term, circular labor migration patterns. However, negative cases

suggest that opportunities for settlement exist, but shift throughout the life course, depending on family structure and access to social networks.

Implications for Migration Policy

Using a case study of US guestworkers in the crab processing industry, I find that employers and the state have been able to maintain migrant workers' liminal membership by relying on the labor of transnational mothers. Entrance into labor migration and maintaining migration as a temporary status is a gendered process that is structured by strictly regulated legal status, relatively isolated working and living conditions, and ties to family in Mexico.

Embeddedness in transnational families and regular return migration has implications for *jaiberas'* interest and ability in remaining in the United States permanently. Compared to other labor migrants, *jaiberas* return home often – at least for four months each year. For women with children, this maintains an orientation toward family in Mexico that proscribes interest in settlement. However, women without children who enter under the same legal contexts sometimes find pathways to settlement and form families in the United States. These comparisons demonstrate that both legal and family contexts matter.

These findings are particularly relevant given current US policy discussions surrounding guestworker programs and temporary visas. There is a great deal of inequality in the treatment of H-class temporary visas based on the “skill” level of the visa holder. Unlike H-2 visas, H-1B visas for highly skilled workers are considered “dual intent” visas; holders are considered “nonimmigrants,” but they can also pursue permanent legal residence and apply for green cards (Geddes 2013). They can also bring families to the United States and aren't required to prove “compelling ties” to home countries. In return for their specialized skills, in demand from US employers, H-1B immigrants are given a pathway to full membership in the United States. Meanwhile, H-2 workers, who are considered to be low skilled, are afforded few rights and privileges.

There is no pathway to legal settlement for H-2B workers, “guests” brought into fill low-wage, precarious jobs. Yet classifications like “temporary” and “nonimmigrant” seem inappropriate to describe the migration experiences of women who have been migrating for decades, spending two-thirds of each year in the United States and away from their families in Mexico. In this context, the aspect of this migration that is temporary and seasonal is workers' short return trips to Mexico each winter. These findings expand upon other scholars' arguments regarding the racialized and classed nature of the differential rights afforded to temporary workers, who, unlike skilled workers, are denied the human right of family reunification (Hwang and Parreñas 2010). Migrant workers, who are often subject to exploitation, are arguably even more vulnerable when placed in precarious work/family positions.



As Schmalzbauer (2015) points out, guestworkers enter H-2 labor streams as a safer alternative to undocumented migration, but ironically, they have lower earning power than undocumented workers. Therefore, this work supports other findings that state-sponsored guestworker programs exploit migrants' family responsibilities to maintain a docile, low-wage labor force and deter permanent settlement (Basok 2000; Hwang and Parreñas 2010; Binford 2013; Schmalzbauer 2015). The women I interviewed understand the boundaries of their visas and have realistic expectations about their prospects to remain in the United States. Those who come untethered to husbands and children in Mexico may take the chance to stay in the United States permanently, albeit undocumented, to form their families here. Some stay legally by marrying American citizens. However, settlement is unrealistic for women who have families waiting for them in Mexico and who have no legal options to bring them to the United States. In this sense, the regulations of this visa disadvantage people who follow the rules, while women like Carol, who took the risk to stay and break her contract, has been able to stay here, become a citizen, pursue higher education, and open a business. Women who have children in Mexico may have the most to gain from working in the United States – financial support for their families – but single women have more opportunities for permanent settlement, albeit unauthorized.

Women indicate that they are able to make housing improvements, provide for their families' basic needs, and perhaps contribute to their children's mobility through investments in their education. Yet the fact that many remain in this temporary labor migration scheme for decades suggests that prospects for meaningful mobility are few. Instead, as Griffith and Contreras (2014, 157) suggest, their migration results in the "reproduction of a permanent working class."

Scholars have documented the ways isolated work environments place migrants in vulnerable situations (Hagan 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001), including other H-2B industries (Donato et al. 2005). The relative isolation of Springville and Riverview workers creates conditions under which they are vulnerable to employer control, particularly because their contracts tie them to a single employer each season. Some workers were very cautious about speaking to me until I assured them I had no connections with their supervisors. The only workers who complained about their working conditions were Carol and Elba, who had since left the industry.

Future reforms should include more involvement from third-party institutions and agreements between sending and receiving states to mediate the control of employers over workers and variation across employers. In recent years, there has been some success in increasing regulations, including 2015 legislation that provides new protections for wages and working conditions, protections for workers who have filed complaints or consult with advocates, and a requirement that employers pay for inbound and return transportation and reimburse



visa costs. More substantial overhauls of guestworker visas have also been introduced, but have gained little traction. For example, in 2013, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act proposed the “W” visa as an alternative to H-2A and H-2B, which, among other things, would allow visa holders to apply for a green card. The legislation passed in the Senate but not in the House. Discussions of comprehensive immigration reform have been primarily focused on the undocumented population, but it is critical to also address the rights and regulations of guestworkers and those with liminal legal status.

These accounts demonstrate how legal and employment contexts intersect with family structure to maintain female guestworkers’ status as temporary workers. The seasonal nature of the *jaiberas*’ work and perpetual returns home maintain strong emotional attachment and moral pressures that prevent them from remaining in the United States permanently. In this sense, the incorporation of women who are transnational mothers and wives in H-2 labor streams allows this form of migration to remain “managed” by employers and the state. Taking into account migrant workers’ lived experiences is critical to creating more just policies. My findings suggest that reforms are necessary to protect workers’ ability to participate in the US labor market without enduring long periods of family separation and to provide a legal and achievable pathway to settlement for those who desire it.

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