

Contents

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Immigrants in Western Greece Region: Urban – Rural Continuum or Divide?	
THEODOROS IOSIFIDES, THANASIS KIZOS, ELEKTRA PETRACOU, EKATERINI MALLIOTAKI, KONSTANTINA KATSIMANTOU AND ELENA SARRI	91
Wrestling with 9/11: Immigrant Perceptions and Perceptions of Immigrants	
CAROLINE B. BRETTELL	107
Women’s Cityward Migration, Domestic Service and Schooling in Southern Mexico	
JAYNE HOWELL	125
Refugee Policy is a Realist’s Nightmare: The Case of Southeast Asia	
CHEN CHEN LEE	137
New figures for old stories: Migration and remittances in Nepal	
MICHAEL KOLLMAIR, SIDDHI MANANDHAR, BHIM SUBEDI AND SUSAN THIEME	151
Why Not Me? Women Immigrants and Unemployment in New Brunswick	
JUDITH DOYLE, NICOLA MOONEY AND JANE KU	161
Book review: <i>The Uprooted</i> by <i>Martin et al.</i>	171
Book review: <i>Human Cargo</i> by <i>Moorhead</i>	175

Women's Cityward Migration, Domestic Service and Schooling in Southern Mexico¹

Jayne HOWELL²

Abstract

That 40,000 women work as household workers in Oaxaca City (population 450,000) is deemed "very high for a country as developed as Mexico" (Selby, Murphy and Lorenzon 1991:48; INEGI 2001). Ethnographic data collected among women currently and at one time working as either full-time or daily/hourly domestic workers shed light on the realities faced by unskilled women cityward migrants who find employment in the lowest paid, least prestigious jobs in the urban economy. Two case studies are presented to illustrate ways that women's paid household labor can finance their own or their children's acquisition of the schooling requisite for more gainful, higher paid forms of urban formal sector employment.

Keywords: Oaxacans; Mexico; domestic workers; women; schooling.

Introduction

Domestic service, the fastest growing occupation of Latin American women, is a nexus of numerous factors including the on-going demand for paid workers to complete household chores for urban *patronas* (female bosses) (including housewives and professional and middle-income women) and a supply of women cityward migrants who lack the skills requisite for formal sector employment. The latter are

¹ A longer version of this paper was presented at the March 2006 Latin American Studies Association meetings in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

² Jayne Howell is Professor in Department of Anthropology, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840-1003, USA. Email: jhowell@csulb.edu.

WOMEN'S CITYWARD MIGRATION

pushed by a rural economy that provides insufficient opportunities for schooling, paid employment, or access to land. The precarious economic circumstances of household workers have spurred decades of on-going debate regarding the economic and social exploitation inherent in this occupation. Is domestic service a "dead end job" as Elizabeth Jelin (1976) argues, or rather, as Margo Smith (1973, 1989) contends a "stepping stone" to a better life than is available for women (and their children) in the natal village? The majority of researchers follow Jelin in arguing that despite the opportunities for urban employment and perhaps greater social freedom than one finds in villages, domestic service is an undesirable job that does not provide long- or short-term security, benefits, a living wage or significant opportunities for social mobility. Ethnographic research conducted in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, presents a third possibility: while the socio-economic status of the majority of domestic servants who have minimal or no schooling is unlikely to change, acquisition of schooling supported through domestic servant can provide some determined domestics servants and/or their children with the potential for social mobility and at minimum the opportunity for job and lifestyle change.³

³ Since 1986, I have conducted participant observation and interviews with hundreds of women working in the informal and formal sector in Oaxaca City and rural communities from all parts of the state. Initial studies of schooling strategies among 150 women in the late 1980s indicated that among the one-fourth who had to finance their schooling, the majority worked as *sirvientas de planta* at some time after leaving home. Later on-going studies shifted focus from students to the lifestyles of *sirvientas* who did not further their schooling while working. I do not contend that Lourdes' experiences as a student/*sirvienta* or Imelda's experiences as a *sirvienta* whose daughter completed schooling are typical of the larger population. However, they are not unique even though these types of accomplishments are rarely discussed in the literature on domestic service.

Oaxaca's Socioeconomic Matrix

The southeastern state of Oaxaca (population 3.4 million) provides an ideal setting for examining the possibility of rural residents changing their economic and social status through cityward migration, domestic service and schooling. Oaxaca's rural economy is founded on agriculture supplemented by commerce, craft production, wage labor (INEGI 2001), and a sexual division of labor in which women assume primary responsibility for the running of the household even when they also make economic contributions (Howell 2002; Stephen 1991). The achievements of Oaxaca's native son the legendary Mexican president Benito Juárez (1806-1872) who worked as a household employee while completing basic studies and law school after migrating to Oaxaca City make him a role model for rural Oaxacan households. Oaxacans of both sexes consider education desirable as a means to compete and participate in the modern labor force and for getting a good job (Howell 2002; Selby, Murphy and Lorenzon 1991), yet universal access to schooling is constrained by three primary factors: (1) poverty; (2) the concentration of institutions at all levels (preschool, primary, lower and upper secondary, and university) in urban areas; and (3) gender. Thus although Juárez called for free, universal public education for Oaxacans of both sexes nearly 150 years ago, the state ranks at the bottom of national levels for literacy (21 vs. 9 percent for state and nation respectively) and schooling attainment rates (5.5 versus 9 years of schooling) (INEGI 2000). These rates are lowest in rural areas, with tens of thousands of rural students relocating to larger communities with the intention of furthering their studies beyond those available in their villages.

At the same time, economic marginalization of thousands of rural communities designated as zones of "high exodus" contributes to migration rates in and from this state being among the highest in Mexico; the federal government estimates that at least one in four Oaxaqueños now lives outside his or her birth community (INEGI 2002). International migration has escalated since the 1980s, and remittances of "migradollars" (Durand, Parrado and Massey 1996) from the

WOMEN'S CITYWARD MIGRATION

tens of thousands of Oaxaqueños and their descendants now living in Southern California (López and Munro 1988) are a critical source of revenue in the state's economy. The recent interest in and emphasis on US-bound migration obscures the importance and consequences of the steady stream of internal migration from rural Oaxaca to the provincial capital of Oaxaca City (450,000 residents) that coincides with a quadrupling of the urban population since the 1970s (INEGI 2001). Though women's participation in international migration is steadily increasing, women are four times less likely than men to cross the US border (DIGEPO 2000). In contrast, national migration follows the "Latin American pattern," where women comprise the majority of cityward migrants, with the primary destination Oaxaca City (INEGI 1995, 2001). Researchers report that daughters' idealized household roles often make them more vulnerable to school leaving and migration than their brothers (Bourque 1993; Post 2001; Young 1983). Specifically, Kate Young (1983) found that expansion of communications and transportation systems following World War II increased the availability of mass-produced items including *tortillas*, making rural Oaxacan daughters a "surplus labor force" who may forego schooling in order to generate income by working as domestic servants in urban households.

Tourism, Oaxaca City's largest industry, markets the city's feel of "old Mexico" (Hayner 1966) relative to the heavily industrialized northern border and central regions that pull migrants from throughout the nation. Lacking a well-developed industrial economic and employment base, public and casual service sectors employ more than half of urban workers (INEGI 2001). Only one-third of Oaxaca City's economically active population earns the more than the two times the daily minimum wage of 49 pesos (roughly \$4.50 US) that the federal government uses as a poverty level cut-off. That lower-income households survive through income pooling is reflected in Selby, Murphy, and Lorenzon's (1991:48) description of Oaxaca de Juárez as "a city that survives by ordinary people taking in each other's washing" in order to "get by." More than 90 percent of the Oaxacans do-

ing paid household chores including laundry are women performing live-in, daily or hourly labor (COESPO 1993; INEGI 2001). Though mentioned in ethnographies of urban and rural Oaxaca, these women's experiences typically are not a focus of ethnographic inquiry.

Domestic Service in Contemporary Oaxaca

Consistently, Oaxacan domestic servants come from large, poor rural families and tend to have lower levels of schooling than the state average (Howell 2002). The type of paid domestic labor these women perform coincides with their place in the life cycle as well as the location of their household. Both of the women whose experiences are discussed below began working as live-in *sirvientas de planta*, who are stereotypically teenagers or unmarried women who work exclusively for one household, performing an assortment of household tasks. Mexican labor law states that these *sirvientas* should receive at minimum room and board, health coverage, a salary that is at least one-half the monthly minimum wage, paid vacation, and the right to study. Yet *sirvientas'* lack of knowledge of the law and the merging of home and work place mean that private arrangements may not follow with this legislation. Indeed, my research among employers and employees over the past decade indicates that the fewer than 1 in 5 domestic servants who obtain marketable credentials while employed are the exception rather than the rule (Howell 2002).

For cityward women migrants, the primary advantage of live-in work is that it provides room and board in the urban center using skills learned at home. Disadvantages include that the low base salary from which remittances are sent home provides little if any financial cushion, while the possibility of dismissal due to employers' accusations of theft, moral indecency, or preference for younger workers is a consistent threat. After motherhood or marriage *sirvientas de planta* frequently work for multiple employers on an hourly or rotating daily *de pie* (mobile) basis, performing any of the tasks that live-in workers do for typically higher wages. In contrast to the women in elite and middle-income house-

WOMEN'S CITYWARD MIGRATION

holds who employ them, household workers in both categories experience financial instability as they age, having no benefits or pension and limited savings after 30 or more years in the labor force.⁴ Live-in workers who never form their own families may also find themselves without a home and relying on the kindness of relatives when not employed (Cook and Binford 1991; Howell 2002). The early entry of both women discussed below into household employment at a young age is common among women employed in both types of household labor, while the choices each has made regarding education for herself and her children respectively reflect the local ideal that one can improve one's economic situation and lifestyle through schooling.

The Teenage Domestic Servant-Student: "Yo Solo Lo Gané"

Lourdes Maza - a retired secretary in her 70s - completed the three years of primary school available in her tiny village and began working for local teachers before age 10. Although her mother did not see the value of schooling, she agreed that there was "nothing for [Lourdes]" in their pueblo and allowed her to accompany her employers to a larger community where Lourdes completed the sixth grade. With her *patronas'* help, Lourdes's moved to Oaxaca City to work as a *sirvienta de planta* while completing a secretarial course so that she would not "waste" her education. Though she says that she would have preferred to study medicine or law, like the majority of domestic servants who eventually obtain skilled jobs Lourdes instead pursued a *carrera corta* (literally, a short career) that enabled her to complete her studies more quickly and less expensively than if she had pursued a university degree (Howell 2002; see also Gill

⁴ Locals often favor a *ricos/pobres* (rich/poor) dichotomy, while researchers opt for a 3-tiered "upper-middle-lower" class scheme based on income and lifestyle (Murphy and Stepick 1991) or adopt Portes' (1985) 5-strata model that recognizes the disproportionately high number of casual sector workers in Latin American cities.

1994). Upon completing her secretarial training, she worked two jobs simultaneously for over 30 years. Receiving a stable income and benefits, she constructed a small home on land she purchased outside the city center. She raised her only son Rodrigo (now in his early 50s) as a single mother, paying a neighbor for childcare. After Lourdes financed his schooling through lower secondary school (which was optional at that time), Rodrigo entered a military academy because it provided free studies and training, and guaranteed employment and benefits after graduation. He and his family have lived in Mexico City for over 30 years. Lourdes received pensions from each job after retiring in her early 50s, and pays a teenage neighbor to come in 2-3 times per week to wash her laundry and do heavy cleaning. She stated, "I earned this myself!" to reflect her pride at having worked *en casa* to finance the schooling and training that changed her life. The schooling she has obtained enables her to "*defenderme*" (literally to "defend myself"), a phrase frequently used by women to explain that they are able to protect or support themselves and their families (Howell 1999).

The Working Mother at Mid-Life: "Para que mis hijas estudiaran"

Imelda García (age 48), a divorced mother who began working as a *sirvienta* at age 8, earns 100 pesos per day cleaning 3-5 homes per week for foreign nationals in Oaxaca. She considers herself "struggling" to support her family on this income that is actually twice the minimum wage. After separating from her husband 10 years ago, she re-entered the workforce and slowly built the 2-room home where she lives with her youngest daughter Sol (age 23). Her two eldest daughters studied through the upper secondary level and worked in office jobs before marrying; Sol completed an accounting degree at a private university. Though Sol initially received a full scholarship, it was reduced by half after two years. Rather than forfeit the training Sol had completed, Imelda took on extra work to pay the 700 peso monthly tuition and all registration costs until Sol finished. To cover Sol's tuition, she generated extra earnings whenever possible

WOMEN'S CITYWARD MIGRATION

by using the sewing skills she acquired in the only course she took while working as a *sirvienta*. Though her earnings are significantly higher than those of live-in *sirvientas*, they are offset by her living and transportation costs, and paying for her own health care. Moreover, she loses income whenever she must take time off of work for emergencies. She says that she made sacrifices so that "my daughters [could] study, because I never had the chance, and I want them to get a better job than I have." Imelda's sentiments parallel those Mary Goldsmith (1989:22) reports among long-term domestic workers in Mexico City, where a mother "dreams of her children's future rather than her own. She envisions for her [daughter] a job in accounting or typing." Imelda's concerns about facing the future without a pension echo those that dozens of women have expressed to me over the years. (See also Cook and Binford 1991.) Imelda insists that if not for her grandchildren, she would join relatives in the United States where her wages would be (she estimates) ten times what she earns in Oaxaca for the same labor.

Concluding Comments

An important finding that emerges most clearly in this re-analysis of these two women's lives is that although for a high number of women cityward migrants lacking other options, domestic service is an undesirable yet viable means of support, for others it is an option that enables them to "earn" their own or their children's studies. The contrasts in the lives of these two women who became *sirvientas de planta* before puberty for very different reasons both reflect the heterogeneity within the growing population of household workers and indicate that schooling can enable domestic workers and their daughters to enter other types of employment. In exceptional cases and with many sacrifices – including living away from home during one's formative years and working long hours while studying – *sirvientas de planta* like Lourdes who enter domestic service with the intention of furthering their studies can move out of the informal sector into more stable, higher paid jobs (Howell 2002). Typically, these women have pursued vocational careers that

enable them to enter the formal sector more quickly. In contrast, *sirvientas de planta* including Imelda who entered the labor force out of economic need do not necessarily have the drive or opportunity to further their own studies, but prioritize schooling as a route to better jobs and financial security for their children.

Both women recognize that *credencialismo* has made schooling at higher levels a requisite for formal sector employment and the possibility of economic solvency. Yet the sacrifices made by domestic servants to achieve this goal are daunting to the majority of women in these positions. Without increased opportunities for schooling – including the presence of dormitories for rural-born students and scholarships – growing numbers of rural-born will likely join the tens of thousands of individuals in similar circumstances who migrate from rural Oaxaca to the United States, where they do the same types of labor for higher wages.⁵

References

- Boserup, Ester (1970) *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Bourque, Susan (1993) "Citizenship and Education in Peru and Mexico: Political Challenges for the 1990s." Pp. 183-205 in *The Politics of Women's Education: Perspectives from Asia, Africa and Latin America*, J. Ker Conway and S. Bourque, eds. Ann

⁵ Although this point cannot be elaborated in an essay of this length, the increasing numbers of domestic servants in Oaxaca is at odds with Lewis Coser's (1973) observation that domestic service should disappear with modernization, reflecting the inconsistencies of economic development in the region. Instead, the situation in Oaxaca supports Ester Boserup's (1970) prediction that domestic service will continue to provide jobs for women denied an opportunity to acquire the skills higher paid, higher prestige jobs in developing "modern" economies.

WOMEN'S CITYWARD MIGRATION

Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- COESPO (Consejo Estatal de Población de Oaxaca) (1993) *Oaxaca Demográfico*. Oaxaca: COESPO
- Cook, Scott and Leigh Binford (1990) *Obliging Need: Petty Rural Industry in Mexican Capitalism*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Coser, Lewis (1973) "Servants: The obsolescence of an occupational role." *Social Forces* 52:31-40.
- DIGEPO (Dirección General de Población) (2000) *Indicadores Socioeconomicos: Indice y Grade de Marginación por Localidad*. Oaxaca: DIGEPO.
- Durand, J., E. Parrado and D. Massey (1996) "Migradollars and Development: A reconsideration of the Mexican Case." *International Migration Review* 30:423-444.
- Gill, Lesley (1994) *Precarious Dependencies: gender, class, and domestic service in Bolivia*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Goldsmith, Mary (1989) "Politics and Programs of Domestic Workers' Organizations in Mexico." Pp. 221-243 *Muchachas No More*, E. Chaney and M. Garcia Castro, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press
- Hayner, Norman (1966) *New Patterns in Old Mexico*. New Haven: College and University Press.
- Howell, Jayne (1999) "Expanding Women's Roles in Southern Mexico: Educated, Employed Oaxaqueñas." *Journal of Anthropological Research* Volume 55:99-127
- _____ (2002) "Servanthood and Self-Employment: Changing Patterns of Domestic Service in Southern Mexico", *Urban Anthropology* 31(3-4):389-422.
- INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía e Informática) (1995) *La Mujer en Oaxaca*. Aguascalientes: INEGI.
- _____ (2001) *Anuario Estadístico Oaxaca*, Tomo II. Aguascalientes: INEGI.
- _____ (2002) *XII Censo General*. Aguascalientes: INEGI.
- Jelin, Elizabeth (1976) "Migration and Labor Force Participation of Latin American Women: The Domestic Servants in Cities." *Signs* 3(1):129-141.
- López, Felipe and Pamela Munro (1999) "Zapotec Immigration: The San Lucas Quiavini experience." *Aztlán* 24 (1): 124-4
- Murphy, Arthur and Alex Stepick (1991) *Social Inequality in Oaxaca*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Portes, Alejandro (1985) "Latin American Class Structures: Their Composition and Change during the Last Decade." *Latin American Research Review* 20:7-39.

HOWELL

- Post, David (2001) "Region, Poverty, Sibship, and Gender Inequality in Mexican Education: Will Targeted Welfare Policy Make a Difference for Girls?" *Gender and Society* 15(3):468-489
- Selby, David, Arthur Murphy, and Stephen Lorenzon (1990) *The Mexican Urban Household: Organizing for Self-Defense*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Smith, Margo (1973) "Domestic Service as a Channel of Upward Mobility for the Lower-Class Woman: The Lima Case." Pp. 191-207 in *Female and Male in Latin America*, A. Pescatello, ed. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- _____ (1989) "Where is Maria Now? Former Domestic Workers in Peru." Pp. 127-142 in *Muchachas No More*, E. Chaney and M. Garcia Castro, eds. New York: United Nations.
- Stephen, Lynn (1991) *Zapotec Women*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Young, Kate (1983) "Creation of a Relative Surplus Population: A Case Study from Mexico." Pp. 149-178 in *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies*. L. Ben-ería, ed. Praeger Publishers