

FLEXIBLE LABOR AND UNDERINVESTMENT IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION ON THE U.S-MEXICO BORDER

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ABSTRACT

For the past 35 years, borderland industry has opened employment opportunities for women in the community of Nogales, Arizona. However, the expansion of free trade with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has aggravated economic instability by promoting the flexible use of labor, a practice that women have increasingly accommodated. Case studies of women engaged in the retail and *maquiladora* industries illustrate the interplay between flexible employment, reproduction, and education. These cases suggest that a strong connection between flexible employment and reproduction is sustained by ideologies that see these as mutually complimentary. At the same time, the connections between education and employment and reproduction activities are notably absent or weak. We argue that investing in the education of women, which could lead to more predictable employment, is in this way subverted by regional economic instability. The alienation of education from the other two realms of women's activities works to the advantage of flexible employment practices and advances the underdevelopment of human capital on the U.S.-Mexico border.

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Ambos Nogales in the Context of Globalization

The articulation of local responses to macroeconomic processes engendered by trade agreements between states is particularly visible in border cities. The development of Ambos Nogales,¹ for example, is a history of the adjustment of local populations to broad-scale economic planning between the U.S. and Mexico. As early as 1965, the establishment of free trade zones² under the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) spurred commercial trade and industrial development between the two nations (Sklair, 1993). Like many other border cities, Ambos Nogales also experienced rapid growth primarily from the influx of migrants in search of economic opportunities. Most notably, the BIP laid the groundwork for the *maquiladora* program,³ and by the 1970s, this framework for “free trade” between the U.S. and Mexico was tested (Kopinak, 1996). The *maquiladora* program included favorable economic concessions for American industries in Mexico, the use of cheap Mexican labor, and lax enforcement of Mexican labor laws. Although the *maquiladora* program was initially limited to the U.S.-Mexican foreign trade zones, in 1971 the BIP was officially extended to the entire Mexican Republic. By 1974, there were 455 *maquiladoras* in Mexico. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, which went into effect on January 1, 1994, deepened trade policies reserved for *maquiladora* industries under the BIP into non-*maquiladora* industries including agriculture, fisheries, mining, and forestry (Weintraub, 1996). Because of its history, the community of Ambos Nogales presents a unique opportunity to investigate the intersection of macrolevel forces and microlevel transformations.

Research⁴ conducted in Nogales, Arizona, in 1996-1998 used qualitative and quantitative methods to determine the extent to which Mexican-ori-

gin households invested in the education or training of their female members as an economic strategy (O’Leary, 2006). For the qualitative part of the study, women from a convenience sample of households were interviewed. The interviews aimed to discover how households arrived at decisions to educate and train household members. The women’s narratives fleshed out how they considered and negotiated their educational ambitions and the extent to which their goals were realized.⁵ From these interviews, the workings of the various facets of socioeconomic interaction were also made intelligible, providing insights about dilemmas borne out of cultural expectations and women’s integration into the U.S. economy. In this way, the details of household ideologies and social life were grounded within the flow of economic change.

A notable outcome of trade policies between the U.S. and Mexico has been the increased vulnerability of local communities to global market instability. Quintero-Ramírez (2002) summarize how the opening of national economies by international trade agreements has incited competition among corporations for international markets, resulting in a variety of strategies designed to cut operational costs and increase profits. The ability to move across national boundaries in search of pools of cheap labor is one strategy. This has resulted in the loss of jobs in industrialized nations. Another has been to reorganize the labor force to make it more efficient and cost effective using flexible employment. Making the best use of part-time, temporary, short-term, and homework employees is the essence of flexible labor. Domestic industries not able to relocate have also generated instability. In Mexico, for example, domestic companies are forced to become more efficient in order to remain competitive with multinational industries. Their

success in this regard has been low and has resulted in the widespread migration of workers to the U.S.

In the 1980s, employers increased the use of flexible labor to increase profits (Rosenberg, 1991, p 75). Known as restructuring, flexible employment has contributed to economic instability by making employment precarious. There are several types of flexible labor arrangements, but flexibility essentially refers to the freedom a firm has to regulate the level of wages it pays by adjusting the number of hours employees work or the size of the workforce in response to production demands. In essence, labor becomes a commodity. In response to the reduction of hours or wages, affected households have been shown to deploy more of their members into the workforce, including women.⁶ Flexible employment has thus been erroneously perceived as a matter of “choice.” For women, in particular, flexible employment has been promoted as something that allows them to work while carrying out household reproduction obligations (Barndt, 1999). The idea of “choice” also needs to be understood in the context of discrimination patterns based on existing social divisions, such as gender, race and ethnicity (Barndt, 1999; Tienda, Donato & Cordero-Guzmán, 1992), and the lack of collective bargaining capacities (Barndt, 1999; Natti 1990; Quintero-Ramírez, 2002). It also bears emphasizing that the impact of discrimination and lack of economic autonomy is not limited to Third World nations but is, in fact, a problem where ever ethnic and racial minority women are found. (Tienda, Donato & Cordero-Guzmán, 1992).

The instability that comes with flexible, intermittent employment can be improved to a large degree with investment in human capital through education or training (Becker, 1993). The idea that education and training improves earnings and job stability is widely accepted. Education can help procure more standard employment arrangements, “core” employment sectors characterized by full-time and permanent employment, and job stabil-

ity (De Anda, 2000). De Anda’s research (2000) shows women of Mexican origin—especially young, recently immigrated, and poorly educated women—have generally been concentrated in “periphery” employment sectors, those characterized by frequent joblessness and involuntary part-time work. The consequences of a precariously employed workforce include stagnant earnings and increased poverty rates.

In impoverished households, the possibility of increased investment in the education of its members is a complex proposition. Education is often perceived as selfish or wasted on secondary workers (Hakenberg, Murphy, & Selby, 1984, pp 212-213), or too costly (Bean, Chapa, Berg & Sowards, 1994). The expense of education and job training is thus subsumed by more critical expenditures. This seems to be especially true according to a study by Bean et al. (1994). This study on the decreasing educational attainment of second and third generation Mexican-Americans suggests that perhaps the educational aspirations of the Mexican-origin first generation has failed to provide any real economic advantage, resulting in less education attainment for second and third generations. Although conventional thinking holds that investments in education and training to improve skills will enhance future productivity and job stability, other factors confound expected occupational outcomes. For example, labor market structure that relegates certain groups to sectors that predisposes them to an economic disadvantage (De Anda, 2000) and racism (Tienda, Donato & Cordero-Guzmán, 1992) mediate the advantage education is expected to have. Consequently, household decisions concerning education necessarily factor in other concerns, pragmatic or otherwise, outlining a reality of how and why decisions to investment in education are made.

A number of studies examining obstacles to education have focused on cultural limitations placed on Mexican-origin women by prescribed gendered roles. According to several studies, the

formation of educational goals and career development are often hampered by traditional sex role expectations, demonstrated by:

- the interruption of women's education plans by employment to economically help their low-income families (Vasquez, 1982, Young, 1992),
- the transmission of the idea that education weakens cultural identity, which may lead to the alienation of women from their families and from potential marriage partners (Niemann, Romero, & Arbona 2000),
- parents' lower educational aspirations for daughters (Gándara, 1982), and
- role conflicts as women attempt to balance marriage, children, education, and ultimately, a career (Vasquez, 1982, p 149).

Conversely, overcoming sex role expectations that impede the formation of educational goals has been achieved by:

- motivation and encouragement from parents as well as other important people (Vasquez, 1992).
- positive female role models (Gándara, 1992, 1995; Vasquez, 1982; Vigil, 1988; Young, 1992),
- the help-seeking orientations of young women that result in the creation of supportive relationships with school personnel, conducive to academic success (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), and
- a reliance on a cultural framework that emphasizes social exchange and networking to help women reach their educational goals (O'Leary, 2006).

Explanations of the processes by which women acquire education are thus made visible by observations in a microlevel context of culturally stipulated gender norms. In the section that follows, women's narratives will illustrate household decisions that are better understood within the broader macrolevel circumstances that engender and feminize flexible employment.

Case Studies in the Analysis of Flexible Employment on the Border

The following case studies of Mexican-origin women illustrate the relationship between reproduction, education, and flexible employment. For this paper, reproduction is defined as

...a stage in a process whereby time and effort are invested in offspring who later increase the household labor pool and tend aged parents when they become physically dependent (Wilk and Netting, 1984, p.14).

Reproductive tasks are commonly associated with motherhood and domestic activities related to the care, feeding, education and emotional support of household members. The first case studies show that flexible employment is strongly related to reproduction and the strength of this relationship works to undermine the undertaking of education and training activities that would lead to increased household economic stability and human capital development. A final case study suggests that supplanting ideologies that promote reproduction with one that promotes independence might lead to increased education for women and the development of human capital on the U.S.-Mexico border.

1. The Crash of the Retail Economy and The Kress Store Closure

For more than a decade, Mexican peso devaluations have severely hurt independent retail businesses, a long-time source of employment for women. Natti's research (1990) shows that the proportion of women participating in chain-store employment has increased in recent years and that employment is generally low-skilled and part-time. In the fall of 1996, the popular Kress store in downtown Nogales, Arizona, closed. The general public blamed the closure on the economic recession that led to the devaluation of the Mexican peso in December of 1994.⁷ Numerous businesses on the border ultimately failed because many of their customers were shoppers coming from Mexico, not only from

across the line (Nogales, Sonora) but from points further south, such as Hermosillo. For the retail industry, flexible employment has also been a way to lower the cost of labor because the full cost of hiring full-time employees is nearly eliminated.⁸

Leticia: Balancing Employment and Family

Leticia, 52, was displaced after the Kress Store closed. As a young woman, her family had enjoyed economic stability with the income provided by her father's appliance repair business in Nogales, Sonora. All of her older brothers studied for professional careers, and one became a physician. Leticia was in her second year of private school studying English, in Nogales, Arizona, when her father's sudden death caused a change in the family's economic situation. Upon her father's death, a brother took over the family appliance repair business but it soon failed. At this time, Leticia was forced to quit the more expensive private school in exchange for the study of *comercio*, (office skills), which was thought to be more marketable. She then went to work for a local accountant in Nogales, Sonora, at age 17.

Leticia's mother was already 43 years old when Leticia was born. Her most pressing concern after her husband's death and her own failing health was for Leticia's future. Leticia explained that for women in those days, an occupation was not looked upon as a means to assure one's future, nor was education. Instead, the idea that a man was responsible for the support of his wife and family was impressed upon the women of her generation:

...en aquellos tiempos, no se pensaba en el trabajo para asegurar el futuro de una mujer, ni en la educación, solo se inculcaba que el hombre era quien podía proporcionar seguridad a la mujer.

[...in those days, work was not thought of as a way to insure a woman's future, neither was education, it was only inculcated that a man was the one who could provide a woman her security.]

One day, Leticia off-handedly mentioned to her mother that her employer jokingly expressed that

he might have to marry her because he and his girlfriend had had an argument, possibly ending the relationship. Leticia said that her mother nearly jumped out of her deathbed. Grabbing her daughter and shaking her as if to jolt her into reality, her mother cried out that this was the opportunity she had been praying for; God had answered her prayers and she could now die in peace knowing her daughter would be provided for. Pressure was brought to bear on Leticia's employer, his comment having been taken seriously, and marriage arrangements were made in a matter of two weeks. Leticia said that she was the object of town gossip as rumors spread about a suspected premarital pregnancy and a "shot-gun" marriage:

Toda la gente me señalaba; que yo estaba embarazada, que mi hermano le había puesto una pistola atrás a Juan para que se casara conmigo, que de qué otra manera se justificaba que él que ahora es mi esposo hubiera dejado a su novia de un día para otro, que yo antes de casarme ya era su amante, que yo me acostaba con él ... fui la comida del día...era la desventaja de vivir en un pueblo chico, todos te conocen.

[Everyone pointed me out, that I was pregnant, that my brother had forced Juan to marry me at gunpoint, that for what other reason would he, who is my husband, leave his girlfriend from one day to the next, and that we were lovers before we married, that I slept with him ... I was the talk of the town, that is the disadvantage of living in a small town, everyone knows you.]

She says that she looks on with envy at the younger generation of women who do not hesitate to tell others to mind their own business.

Leticia's mother died about a year and a half after her marriage. Leticia sarcastically remarked that her mother must have rolled in her grave to know of the so-called security that marriage had provided her. She laments that her more than 25 years of marriage have resulted in empty promises and stagnant dreams. Her husband became the sole administrator of the household's resources, but they have yet to realize any real economic stability.

Mi mamá me aconsejaba que esperara, que pronto iba a superar los problemas, pues yo vivía esperanzada...y luego él también me decía: 'vas a ver cuando termine de estudiar te voy a comprar lo que siempre has querido.' Pues uno se ilusiona, y se imagina que cuando ese momento llegue ya no tendremos tantos problemas económicos. Pero ya pasaron 25 años y seguimos igual.

[My mother advised me to wait, that we would soon resolve our problems, well I lived my life hopeful...then he too would tell me: 'you will see that when I finish my education, I will buy you what you have always wanted.' Well, one is filled illusions. One imagines that when that moment comes there won't be so many economic problems. But 25 years have passed and nothing has changed.]

Leticia complained that her husband did not keep her informed about household economic matters. He makes all the important decisions regarding his work, finances, and plans for the future, and disregards her opinion in what she describes as *macho mexicano*⁹ fashion. She was unaware of any provisions being made for her financial security. At 51, she could only guess about her economic future and worried if she were left to provide for herself. Efforts to convince him to pay for their daughter's college education after he withheld the necessary material and moral support for her to continue had failed. Leticia has also pleaded with him to buy a computer for their youngest son with no success. She added that they had nothing—neither home nor car—to call their own: "...*ni carro, ni casa—nada es propio.*"

In 1976 Leticia began working outside the home in efforts to achieve a measure of economic autonomy. Part-time employment satisfied her dual need to be home to watch her children when they were still small and help her household economically. In addition to spending her wages as she wished, she enjoyed the social contact that came with employment. Her only regret was that her husband dismissed the importance of her contribution to the household for so many years.

In the last years of the Kress store, Leticia was laid off, then rehired. Although she didn't know at

the time, there had been a change of the store's ownership and she lost her seniority after the lay-off. After she became unemployed, she qualified for a rehabilitation program for displaced retail workers provided by the local Job Training and Partnership Act office. Once again encouraged, she took classes in English until the program was terminated.

More recently, she had the opportunity to apply for a job counseling street youth. She applied, but was not hired. Her feelings about not getting the job were mixed. She was reluctant to have a job that would force her to leave her youngest child home alone after school. Although her son is 13, Leticia's search for employment is, for the time being, stifled, outwardly complicated by her sense of duty as a mother, first and foremost.

Quisiera buscar un empleo, pero pienso en que el horario del trabajo, no concordará con el horario de la escuela de mi hijo, el mas chico.

[I would like to look for a job, but I think that the hours of work will not agree with the schedule of classes for my son, the youngest.]

She has often considered moving to Phoenix where she has relatives and would have a better chance of finding employment. Her daughter constantly encourages her to follow through with her plan, but Leticia again reconsiders, fearing that her youngest son would suffer from his parent's separation.

In summary, Leticia's case illustrates that 20 to 30 years ago, acquiring secretarial skills was considered a practical strategy for women who were expected to help support their households. In this sense, education was related to household reproduction. However, education as a strategy was trumped by marriage since husbands were expected to support their wives and families, making education unnecessary. Adhering to traditional roles that emphasize devotion to marriage and family, was, ideally, the road to economic security for women. Investment in a woman's training or education thus reflected short-term goals following conventional

thinking about the need for training or education: it was necessary only to the degree that it would help her acquire a job and that this job was also transitional. Education as a strategy appears only superficially connected to both employment and reproductive realities. Early research examining the relationship between education and employment has critiqued this notion. Baca Zinn's (1982) work showed that employed wives are more likely to create important links with organizations and educational institutions outside the household and through these gain extra-domestic knowledge and skills, which lead to better employment opportunities and more equality in domestic decision-making. Gándara's (1982) work that same year also demonstrated that Chicanas who were employed provided strong role models for daughters, and were more likely than fathers to encourage higher education and nontraditional roles for their daughters. Flexible employment appears, then, to undermine an important link between employment and education.

For many years, retail stores had made use of a flexible labor force, mostly women, who, like Leticia, enjoyed intermittent work that provided some discretionary cash and a measure of autonomy while allowing them to work around hours that were convenient in terms of her motherhood duties. When the independent retail trade industry collapsed in Nogales, Leticia remained committed to flexible employment. Indeed, Leticia's concern about working hours that conflicted with her son's school schedule or leaving Nogales to work in Phoenix attests to the success of flexible employment to appropriate ideologies that exalt women as care-givers. According to Segura's (1991, 1994) research, employment is well within the domain of motherhood for many Mexican-origin women. For most Mexican-born women, "motherhood" does not conflict with employment. For many Chicanas, on the other hand, motherhood and employment represent separate spaces.¹⁰ The ambivalence that

women might feel about working "full time" might in fact come from the re-packaging of motherhood to serve the interest of capital. The case of Leticia clearly demonstrates this. Flexible labor fits well with the articulation of prescribed household reproductive tasks, where the intermittent nature of the work pattern allows women to go back and forth between workplace and homeplace. Flexible employment thus works to undermine women's economic progress in various ways: first by creating regional instability, then by capitalizing on ideologies of motherhood, and finally, by denying opportunities for economic progress they help entrench women's dependence on spouses. The following two cases examine how these further deprive women of education and training opportunities.

2. "Core-Fringe" Employment Structure in the Maquiladora Industry

As part of industry's approach towards more flexible uses of labor, a noted strategy is the combined use of part-time, low-skilled temporary worker with full-time, permanent long-term employees within the industries (Barndt, 1999; Natti, 1990; Rosenberg, 1991) as well as between industries (De Anda, 2000). The strategy of combining both "core" workers with "fringe" workers is used in retail, fast-food restaurants, hospitals and cleaning services (Natti, 1990, pp 379) and agribusiness (Barndt, 1999). Core jobs are characterized by more stability than fringe jobs (De Anda, 2000). However, as the number of full-time jobs decline, workers face increased competition for part-time fringe positions. The following case study illustrates the effect of this employment structure in the maquiladora industry. Two women working in one of the electric component maquiladoras in Nogales, Arizona, are contrasted to demonstrate the differential impact this employment structure can have. For Guillermina, full-time permanent maquiladora employment has offered security and household stability. In contrast, the same maquiladora has

offered only precarious employment for Senovia. Although each respond with different household management practices and philosophies, a strong sense of economic uncertainty overshadows and permeates their experiences and stifles the course of women's educational acquisition.

Guillermina: A Maquiladora Core Employee

Guillermina's household enjoyed a good measure of economic stability. She commented that she lived comfortably and peacefully in her eastside neighborhood, Monte Carlo, which was one of the more established modern neighborhoods of Nogales, Arizona. Its gently curved streets and sidewalks appeared typically suburban and contrasted with the older Nogales neighborhoods, where streets followed the irregular twists and turns of its inclines and gullies. Expansion of the Monte Carlo subdivision had continued eastward in recent years, displaying a trend towards larger, more spacious homes.

Guillermina's large three-bedroom home would be paid off in a few more years. They also had two cars (which were both financed through the bank) and a pick-up truck. The home was comfortably and elegantly furnished with a family room that proudly displayed the various awards, sports medals, and certificates of merit earned by her children.

Guillermina and her husband had come from the border mining town of Cananea, Sonora, 15 years earlier. Her husband completed the *preparatoria* (the equivalent of a high school degree) there, but she had only finished the *secundaria* (middle-school grades to the ninth grade). Guillermina said that her husband had never had difficulty in finding steady employment, which she attributed to his good education. He had been working full-time for the last six years in a customs' agency. Before Guillermina was employed by the maquiladora, she sold tamales to make ends meet. Neighbors, friends and family would help her sell them by getting the word out to potential customers. She didn't believe, as much of the community

does, that there was an employment problem in Nogales, Arizona. She believed instead that those who were unemployed were unemployed by choice: "*Está desempleado el que quiere*," and that there were many opportunities for economic improvement. She also added that she was aware of the various governmental institutions that had job-training programs, but, ultimately, it was one's own responsibility for finding where the employment opportunities were.

Guillermina's resolute style complimented her duties at maquiladora on the U.S. side of the border where she worked full-time. The maquiladora provided the final assembly for a variety of electrical items and packaged them for shipment. Of the 16 to 20 workers employed at any time throughout the year, there were only about four full-time permanent positions. She spoke highly of the manager of the maquiladora and appeared to enjoy her role as leader and mentor to the other workers. As a full-time permanent employee, she enjoyed certain benefits: a pension plan, insurance, and payroll savings. Her position as team leader made her an advocate for the other workers. Although problems with other co-workers were few and far between, Guillermina participated in the training of new hires and helped new workers adjust. Problems were usually smoothed over by talking with the employees and trying to make them feel as if they were part of the team. To this end, she helped promote social relationships between workers by helping to organize social festivities, such as birthday parties or anniversaries.

An important achievement of Guillermina's household is seen by the educational outcomes of her children. Two of Guillermina's three children had already completed high school. Her son had started at the local college, but opted to marry before he finished. Guillermina and her husband were disappointed at his decision, but they felt there was little they could do to persuade him otherwise. Guillermina's daughter, Lilia, also went to Pima

Community College for a few months, then changed to a technical school in Tucson, Arizona, for two years to learn to be a medical assistant. The change in plan was largely due to Guillermina's influence. When asked if she had anything to do with guiding Lilia's career choice, Guillermina said that her daughter initially wanted to study to be a teacher, which would require a university degree and several years of study. She was concerned that her daughter's choice of career would take too long to complete. The risk of not being able to complete a longer plan of study loomed. Therefore, Guillermina and her husband suggested that she choose a shorter plan of study. They had noticed that their daughter enjoyed going to the hospital to read to the elderly patients there, so they began to recommend a noble career in health care, "*...que era una carrera muy bonita*. [...that it was a admirable career]." In addition, Lilia had expressed to her parents a reluctance to leave home. In this way, the decision to commute back and forth to a technical college in Tucson 50 miles away was made. As a bonus, the school promised to help her find employment when she graduated. After Lilia finished her program, she worked for about six months at Holy Cross Hospital in Nogales. She then found employment with a medical practice in the area. As a benefit, the firm provided continuing medical education for its employees on the condition that the employee benefiting from the courses continued on with the firm for a contracted period of time.

This case illustrates power that incertitude can exact on decisions regarding investment in education, regardless of the advantage of household stability. Many indicators suggest that Guillermina's household was economically stable. Both she and her husband were employed full-time, on a permanent, not flexible, basis, owned their home and had access to bank credit. Yet, there was still a tentative approach to investing in the education of her daughter that might lead to more predictable employment and economic stability. Lilia's ambitious ca-

reer goal, becoming a teacher, was thus postponed for the time being, influenced by Guillermina's conservative household management approach. In the work by Flores, Byars and Torres (2002), the authors present a case of a Mexican-American adolescent girl, Laura, who is also uncertain about her career future. Laura also dreamt about going to a university but was afraid to leave her family to go to the university which was two hours away. She also feared not having the skills to succeed and the financial burden that would be placed on her parents. Laura considered attending a local community college and working so that she could live at home and help her family financially. Like Lilia, Laura's personal aspirations were intricately tied to the expectations of her parents. For Lilia, the perception of economic uncertainty rather than the material advantage of stability prevailed, which led to a less demanding career choice for Lilia, and perhaps the more comfortable choice in terms of her desire to remain close to home.

Senovia: A Maquiladora Fringe Employee

In contrast to Guillermina's story, the story of Senovia can be used to further illustrate how education can be easily subordinated by more pressing economic and family concerns within households, and, in a vicious cycle, how the lack of educational preparation make women increasingly vulnerable to managerial manipulation of flexible labor. Senovia is a single mother. She has lived in Nogales, Arizona, for 10 years, the last three of which she has worked in the assembly plant as Guillermina. Unlike Guillermina, however, Senovia's "fringe" employment at the maquiladora has offered little security. Born in 1956, she has two grown children and two grandchildren who live away and an elementary school-aged younger son who lives with her. Her very small apartment in Nogales, Arizona, is located in the central, older part of town. Situated against one of Nogales' many hillsides, the apartment is off one of the more immediate streets that

run alongside the U.S. Mexican border. The street is well known among local residents for its steady stream of *ilegales*¹¹ during all hours of the day and night, and the equally steady stream of border patrol agents in their pursuit. The dwelling was not easily accessed. A narrow gutter-like pathway winds up from a parking lot at the bottom of the hill, up to a complex of older apartment-like units built in the Mexican style of urban architecture with doorways that open onto the paths of pedestrians. One could only image how hazardous the steep path would be when it was iced over during one of Nogales' frosty mornings or for one encumbered by an arm-load of groceries. During the weekdays, Senovia shared the apartment with her sister, who came from across the border to work as a bus driver for the local school district. Their modest dwelling had always been lived-in by her family, she explained, first by her parents, then herself and her children.

Senovia's parents went to the first few grades of primary school. Her father, who was a U.S. citizen, worked at various occupations, including railroad construction. Senovia noted:

Mi papá trabajaba de todo. Él era ciudadano y trabajaba de cargador, de jardinero—de todo—cuando empezaron a construir la vía del tren, él era empleado de allí cuando empezó la construcción.

[My father worked doing everything. He was a citizen and worked as a loader, gardener—everything—when construction of the railroad began, he was employed there when construction began.]

She recalled that as a child, her household faced difficult economic times and she herself was unable to finish her schooling because she had to work and help the family. In contrast, the sister who lives with her went on and studied *comercio*, and her other sister, who lives in nearby Rio Rico, studied both *primaria* and *secundaria* grades (primary and middle school) and *secretariado bilingüe* (bilingual secretarial skills). Overall, she stated, her eight brothers and sisters had many negative education experiences. Teachers would hit them for little reason, which is

why they eventually quit before completing the *secundaria* that has since become mandatory:

...no todos terminamos la secundaria ... ni la primaria ... muchas veces porque no les gustó o porque les pegaba la maestra—por cualquier cosa ya no querían ir a la escuela. Entonces ya no fueron y así se quedaron y ahora ya es requisito que termines la secundaria y si tienes la preparatoria pues mejor... En aquellos tiempos no te pedían de requisito que hubieras estudiado la secundaria, con que estudiaras la primaria bastaba.

[...we did not all finish middle school...nor primary school... many times because we did not like it when the teacher beat us—for any reason, they didn't want to go to school. So they stopped going and that is how they were left behind and now it is a requirement that you finish middle school and if you have high school, well so much the better ... In those days, no one made you complete middle school, having attended primary grades was enough.]

When asked if she would consider the possibility of preparing herself for better employment with additional training or education, she replied that she felt depressed and distracted by the larger problems facing her, specifically with the drug abuse problems of her son who lives in Mesa. She had previously attended English classes, but her present concerns overwhelmed her:

Yo tengo muchos problemas con mi hijo y no tengo cabeza para pensar en algo más, como que no tengo ánimo, como que no puedo concentrarme principalmente en el inglés que ya lo he estudiado....

[I have many problems with my son and I don't have the head to think about anything else, as if I don't have the will, as if I cannot concentrate on the English, which is what I have already studied.]

When we met Senovia, she was working full-time at the maquiladora. However, she was still considered a temporary employee and was therefore not eligible for the employee benefits that go with full-time employment. She saw very little possibility of bettering her economic position by continuing to work at the maquiladora since em-

ployee benefits were offered only to full-time, permanent employees and her continued employment was not guaranteed. Adding to the insecurity of future employment were questions and suspicions about the company's organizational structure. Senovia explained that her co-workers at the maquiladora had compared their paychecks and wondered why the checks come from different companies. Unlike her co-workers who held full-time, permanent positions, Senovia had been working at the maquiladora for three years as a temporary employee and did not foresee any change in her employment status. Undeniably, her prospects for an improved status in her current employment appeared limited. She had completed the 5th grade of school, but the maquiladora didn't require any educational certification or work experience. She was not a U.S. citizen, although her father was; therefore she was not eligible for any of the various job-training programs available in the community.

In spite of the poor prognosis for better employment, Senovia's work history showed that she was a loyal and dedicated employee at several jobs. The certificates on her wall testified to her hard work. She had worked for many years in Kory's, a Nogales women's garment retail shop, minutes away from where she lived. Like so many other retail businesses, Kory's now stood closed and abandoned. Pressures to support a family on her own were compounded by a debt incurred by the hospitalization and rehabilitation costs for a son who contracted meningitis soon after birth, and suffered severe developmental conditions before his death as a teen, twelve years ago. She had been paying this debt for 15 years. Before going to work at the maquiladora, she worked as a clerk or at stocking shelves, at times finding in her work a relief from the problems and emotional strains of raising a severely handicapped child.

Cuando estamos en el trabajo debemos olvidarnos un poco de ellos [los problemas], tratar de dejarlos fuera....

[When we are at work, we need to forget some of the problems, try to leave them outside...]

However, repeated economic downturns reflected by lay-offs and/or reductions in the hours worked per-week made it harder for her to support her household. When her hours were reduced, she looked for other employment. She failed to qualify for any public assistance or unemployment relief. She gave the example of an incident, where, after being laid off she applied for unemployment benefits. After waiting a long time for the approval of her application, she was informed that she was entitled to receive \$38.00 a month. She said that the experience left her so humiliated that she never applied again and has managed to always find some kind of employment. She had often worked night jobs to be with her children during the day. The search for steady, reliable employment led her to the job at the maquiladora.

In part, it is due to an all-important sense of duty to family that Senovia decided to leave the maquiladora job and live with her daughter in Mesa. The merit of this decision can only be measured within the parameters of social prescriptions that outline women's devotion to household and family. She expressed anger and guilt for having worked while her children were little. She reflected critically on herself in suggesting that in having to care for her older handicapped son, she might have neglected her second son, now 19, who had been in continual trouble with the law and with drug addiction.

...él [mi hijo] tiene ese problema: que consume drogas ... desde chiquito he batallado mucho con él, ser porque siempre yo he tenido que trabajar.

[...he (my son) has that problem: that he takes drugs... since he was little I have had had a lot of trouble with him, perhaps because I have always had to work.]

Senovia was convinced of her importance to his recovery and was willing to endure economic

hardships as long as her son was given a chance to rehabilitate himself. According to her, she could expect no one to care for her children as she did. Her sense of responsibility was demonstrated not only by her courage to endure a period of economic uncertainty, but as well in the rationalization that Nogales had little to offer her in the way of economic stability. The importance of this decision was weighed against the benefits that a temporary employment position might have to offer. Although her prospects for a job in Mesa were unknown, she appeared confident knowing that for those who are willing, there would always be work: “*hay mucho trabajo y él que quiere trabajar trabaja, él que es flojo no trabaja porque trabajo hay.* [there are many jobs available and who ever wants to, works, those who are lazy don't work, because the jobs are there.]”

Before leaving for Mesa, a going-away party for Senovia was organized by co-workers from the maquiladora. Since she was a child, economic instability and family problems had undermined her formal preparation for employment, and now they dimmed the prognosis for education and training in the future. In addition, although she did have a work permit, she was not a U.S. citizen and not entitled to many of the government-sponsored programs that could help her weather an economic adjustment. She stated that she had always emphasized the importance of education to her children and still had hopes that her daughter in Mesa would better herself through education. When asked about having similar expectations for her son, and for herself, she smiled and shook her head no.

Senovia's case has much in common with Leticia's. Both suffered unemployment with the crash of the retail industry. Both were forced to enter the workforce as young women to help their families. For both, flexible employment and reproduction seem to be intertwined. In both cases, although perhaps more so in Senovia's case, educa-

tion appears disconnected from both employment and reproductive activities.

3. *Economic Stability and the Break From the Flexible Employment Pattern*

What distinguishes Maribel's case study from the others presented thus far was the presence of a discourse promoting the value of economic autonomy and self-sufficiency. This articulation is reflected in the relative lack of connection between flexible employment, household reproduction, and education. Instead, Maribel's case illustrates the importance of forming meaningful connections between education and career goals. For Maribel, the connection between these two began in high school, contributing to a long-term educational investment resulting in a university education and a permanent break from the grasp of flexible employment.

Maribel: Breaking up with Flexible Employment

Maribel was an attractive, 38-year-old single woman who lived with her parents in their Nogales, Arizona, home. Her parents have been married 44 years. Her father, who was retired, came from Sinaloa to Nogales, Sonora as a small boy. As a young man, he worked in one of the first maquiladoras in Nogales. Later, he worked without authorization in Nogales, Arizona, as a self-taught refrigeration repairman. He had learned to be a repairman through a correspondence course he purchased as a young man. He worked at this trade for the next forty years, and with his wife, raised four children: Norma, Beto, Rosalva, and Maribel. All but Maribel had married and had their own homes.

Maribel's mother, Mrs. Cervantez, received a degree in accounting when she was young in Hermosillo, but she never worked outside the home as an accountant. Upon reflection, she said she had not really been expected to work outside the home but instead to tend to her brothers in the house-

hold until the day of her marriage. She said her upbringing was typical for women in those days, and, to a large degree, she blamed those attitudes that forced women to remain close to home for her difficulty in adjusting to her own daughters' independence when they finished high school. All four of her children did well in school. However, when Norma, the eldest of her children, graduated from high school and expressed her desire to go on to the university in Tucson, Mrs. Cervantez said that she became "sick" with worry, "*...me enfermé de la preocupación...;pero como... , como la podría dejar ir?*" ["...I became sick with worry, but how was I to let her go?"] She openly opposed Norma's intent to leave home. She laughs at herself now, somewhat embarrassed, adding that she even consulted a psychiatrist about her distress and immersed herself in prayer for strength in overcoming her fears. Her primary concern seems to have stemmed from a fear of not knowing what would happen to Norma in light of all that she learned from the news. She was especially worried over reports about young girls being sexually assaulted or killed. With an element of mixed pride, she said that Norma finally convinced her to give her permission by using the advice that she herself had doled out to her children about the need to be independent and about the importance of being prepared for life. Maribel credits Norma for having virtually eliminated this first obstacle in the road to independence, clearing the path for her and her other sister to leave Nogales for a university education several years later.

Of course, there were some necessary concessions. When Norma left home, the family progressed cautiously, placing Norma with an uncle who could assume a supervisory role at the new location. Norma later moved from her uncle's home into an apartment with a friend. She applied for and received financial aid, and she also worked at a bank and was able to later afford a small car. She was successful in earning a degree in education. At the time of the interview, she was divorced but

did not work outside the home, preferring to stay at home with her four children, who were in their teens. Beto was a teacher, also having graduated from the University of Arizona. Unlike her reaction to Norma's leaving, Mrs. Cervantez admitted that when her son Beto decided he wanted to go to the university in Tucson, she did not oppose him as she did Norma. Rosalva, the third of the four Cervantez children, attended the university but left before graduating to get married.

Maribel, the youngest of the four children, provides the most interesting story of the Cervantez' children. Maribel earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona in fashion merchandising. Her interests in fashion merchandizing developed during her high school years when she worked in Capin's, one of the downtown retail shops that failed, along with the other shops in the 1990s. She decided on a career based on this experience and an interest in the buying and selling phases of the retail clothing industry. She graduated from Nogales High School with one of the highest grade point average of her graduating class. This earned her a scholarship with which she attended the University of Arizona. After graduating from the university, she worked in Tucson in a major department store. Her interests continued to open new fields, however, and she continued to take classes at the local community college. These classes filled in the gaps in her education, particularly in computer skills, as well as other areas. She took classes on how to buy a computer, for example, and in income tax preparation to become better acquainted with tax regulations and bookkeeping methods. In 1996, Maribel treated her parents to a trip to Paris, France, for a two-week vacation.

In 1997 Maribel announced that she intended to buy a restaurant. She asked her parents to help her put up the money needed to buy, refurbish, and open the restaurant. Her parents held their breath as their home was put up as collateral—but Maribel never wavered. The last time we saw

Maribel she was proudly greeting and seating diners in her newly opened Italian restaurant on a busy corner in Tucson. Customers were being asked if they wouldn't mind eating in the restaurant outside dining area, since the house was full. Inside, Maribel's two sisters, Norma and Rosalva, were busy attending to customers. Her nephews were busy bussing tables. The hot, steamy kitchen brought forth succulent aromas, and Mr. Cervantez, sleeves rolled up, washed dishes. Mrs. Cervantez, who sat at the cash register, completed the picture of family unity. The perspiration Mrs. Cervantez wiped from her brow might well have been from the hot kitchen; or, it might have been associated with nervousness. Hands clasped in prayer she sighed: "*¡Parece que ya la hizimos!*" ["It looks like we might have made it!"].

This last case is an ideal example of how a household that is economically stable may be better able to resist industry's needs for flexible labor, and improve the educational outcomes for family members, including females. Maribel benefited from the windows of opportunity provided by her family from an early age. The first was the opportunity to work outside the household where she came to recognize the social and economic benefits of employment. In Vasquez's (1982) examination of barriers to education, personal commitment to either an academic or occupational goal was one of the most important determinants of a Chicana's ability to persist in college. The second was the opportunity to go to school with an ideology, promoted by parents, that emphasized economic autonomy. The emphasis on independent behavior and self reliance was also an important factor in the success of high-achieving Chicanas in Gándara's study (1982). Another factor among high-achieving Chicanas that can be used in the analysis of Maribel's case is that most of the subjects in Gándara's study were also unmarried and childless. Perhaps the over-arching goal of female autonomy best distinguishes this household from Guillermina's, which was similar in terms of economic stability and Lilia's unmar-

ried status. The apparent independence of the three critical tensions under examination, flexible employment, reproduction, and education, seemed to result in autonomous educational goals for Maribel, and, with it, came greater economic autonomy.

Analysis

The border city of Nogales, Arizona, provides the context for assessing the impact of regional economic instability on the labor force participation of Mexican-origin women. This border community represents a living laboratory in which the effects of 35 years of economic planning between the U.S. and Mexico play out. In this time, it has experienced exponential population growth, chronic economic instability, and a growing flexible employment sector. More and more, employers are opting for the flexible use of labor to adapt to market uncertainty. These strategies preserve regional economic instability by increasing the numbers of unemployed and underemployed workers. Case studies of women working in the retail and maquiladora industries show that flexible employment allows women to move almost seamlessly between workplace and home, a tactic that seems to undermine the adoption of education and training as a viable strategy that would help defeat economic instability.

Case studies of women engaged in the retail and maquiladora industries help discern the linkages between important macrolevel forces, by way of offers to engage in the flexible employment sector, and microlevel household ideologies that articulate a female commitment to reproduction. The relationship between these are schematically conceptualized below for each of the cases.

For Case 1 (Figure 1), we reexamine the tensions present before NAFTA, and after. Before NAFTA, Leticia describes what could be interpreted as a strong link between "Reproduction" and "Education," represented by the solid arrow between in

Figure 1. Her education in a private Catholic school was interrupted when her father died and the family's business failed. She did continue to study office skills and obtained an office job. This job presumably helped sustain her widowed mother's household. However, she states that in the past, a woman's future did not lie in her occupation but in marriage. To be sure, soon after her marriage, she quit working. Her narrative is consistent with Maribel's mother, who also stated that after she married, she no longer worked outside the home. In 1976 free trade expanded in the border region and Leticia began working outside the home in an effort to achieve a measure of economic autonomy. Part-time employment satisfied her dual need to be home with her children and help her household economically. This is schematically illustrated by the dotted arrow in Figure 1 that links Flexible Employment to Household Production. Leticia continued working into the post-NAFTA period, when she was laid off. By then, flexible employment and household production seem to be inextricably linked. This is represented by the merging of Flexible Employment and Household Production in the right panel of Figure 1. During the global recession of the 1980s, which was related to economic restructuring, increased world poverty was related to increased employment of women, older men, and children—pools of labor that were willing to accept precari-

ous employment (Gilbert, 1994). The rates of unemployment and underemployment of these groups also increased. The post-NAFTA scheme illustrates a marriage of Flexible Employment and Reproduction and the lack of connection between these and Education.

The second case study contrasts two women based on their employment status at a maquiladora. In the left box in Figure 2, we can understand the relationship between the different tensions by way of Guillermina's narrative. For a core employee, the scheme does not involve Flexible Employment. However, the relationship between Reproduction and Education is not very substantial and denoted by a dashed line linking the two. Education was not a factor for Guillermina's fulfillment of her household reproductive roles, and this appears to impacted somewhat on the formation of Lilia's educational goals. Although Guillermina's household is not in the grasp of the flexible employment pattern, the financial commitment needed for the more ambitious career path for her daughter, Lilia, was absent. The case study shows that even a sense of economic instability can influence investment decisions and choices about educational goals for women. A conservative decision to invest time and money in response to the perceived threat of instability led to the less demanding career choice for Lilia. In other words, economic uncertainty prevailed to the detriment of setting and achieving higher educational goals. In contrast is Senovia's case study, schematically depicted in the right panel of Figure 2. Here we see the inextricable overlap of household production and flexible employment and the disconnection of education representing the interruption of schooling. In Senovia's case, a lifetime of job instability and the trap of flexible employment can be blamed on the lack of education.

In the final case (Figure 3), we present yet another scheme in which the connections between flexible employment, reproduction, and education are absent altogether. Much like Guillermina's

Figure 1: Balancing Employment and Family

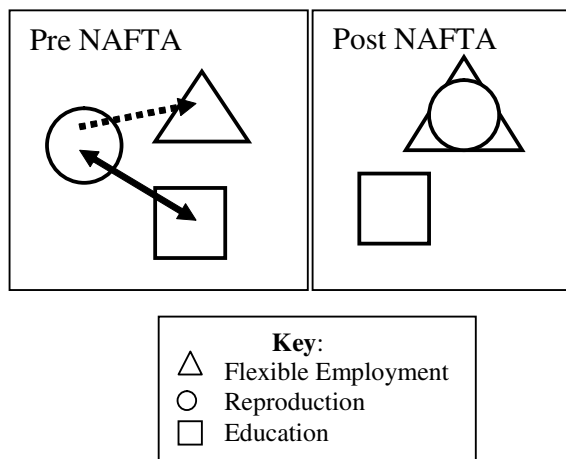
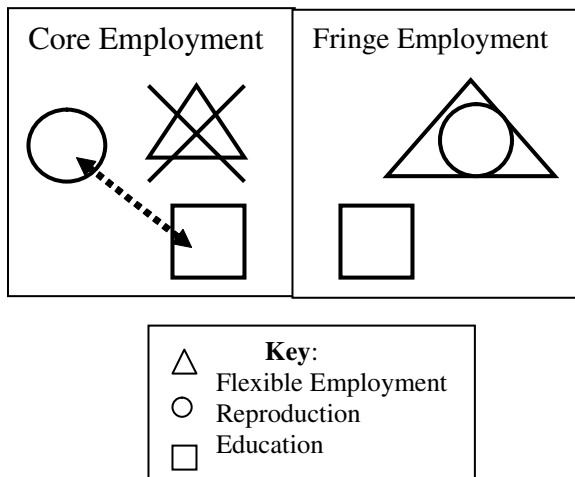


Figure 2: Core and Fringe Employment



household, Maribel's household is economically stable, relieving the women of the pressure to work to help support the household. In addition, the pressures induced by reproduction are absent. What is important in this scheme is the addition of a fourth element, "Employment or Career Goals," which is strongly linked with Education and illustrated clearly by Maribel's case study.

The relationship between education and workforce participation is in this way structurally different. The structural difference parallels a household ideology that also differs from that articulated in the previous cases. In the scheme representing Maribel's case, education is not the means by which the household improves economically, although following the logic of the relationship between education and occupational outcomes, it can be expected to do so. In other words, education is not con-

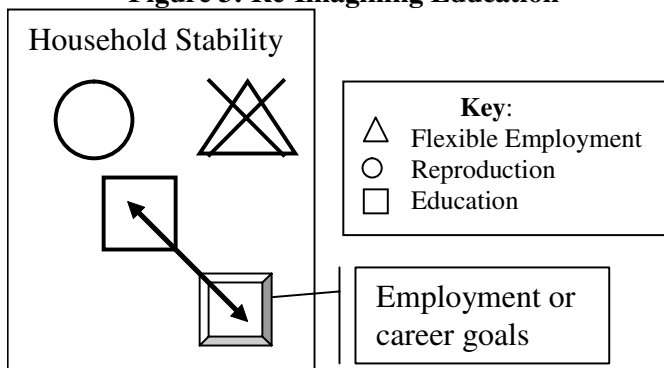
nected to a household's reproductive needs. Instead, education was re-imagined as a means for achieving autonomy and independence.

Conclusion

Case studies of women engaged in the retail and maquiladora industries illustrate the interplay between flexible employment, reproduction, and educational activities. A range of experiences suggests that a household's decision to invest in the education of women is mediated by broader economic uncertainties. Some of the earlier reasons underlying the educational plans and the corresponding investment in education of women were related to the economic needs of the household. The undertaking of employment activities also seemed to follow this logic: women's employment was related to the economic needs of household. Meeting this need was intensified with chronic economic instability. Set in the context of dwindling economic resources, the expansion of women's reproductive roles came to include flexible employment activities. Indeed, the success of flexible employment seems to depend on this logic. Flexible employment is thus promoted as part and parcel of reproduction. With chronic economic instability, the connection between flexible employment and reproduction becomes economically solidified and socially accommodated.

As a strategy for countering a household's economic instability, flexible employment competes with education. However, the undertaking of education or training is not considered part and parcel of reproduction. Furthermore, with the exception of Maribel's case, education is not considered part and parcel of employment. Because of education's lack of connection to the other important realms of women's activities, reproduction and flexible employment, it becomes alienated from any

Figure 3: Re-Imagining Education



planning households may undertake to improve their economic situation. Even in households with a measure of economic stability, fear (or perceived fear) of economic instability may preempt education, making investing in the education of women as a viable strategy tentative at best.

One way to arrest this trend is illustrated by Maribel's case. In her economically stable household, there is an increase in the investment in the education of the women of that household. This illustration is consistent with previous findings showing that in economically stable households, women, more so than men, are likely to benefit by way of an increased investment in their education (O'Leary 1999). Equally important to this finding is the correlation of an ideology that would support the idea that women's education is intrinsically tied to reproduction, and not separate from it. In fact, the average education of Mexican-origin household members is significantly raised with increases in the educational attainment of the female head of household (O'Leary 2006). The Cervantez household ideology provides evidence of how increased investment in education may be articulated. In the Cervantez household, the ideologies that play into the hands of capital and its needs to maintain a pool of flexible employees were redirected to benefit the household. In other words, there appears to be a re-thinking of the reproductive ideologies that helped direct both women's educational plans and employment activities during an earlier period and later predisposed women to exploitation by capital. With the shift in ideology, investing in the education of women, which could lead to the increase in human capital and more predictable employment, is set in motion.

Notes

1. The border cities, Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, are commonly referred to as one. Both, ["Ambos,"] were founded in 1882 when the railroads from Guaymas, Sonora, and Kansas City, Missouri, were joined. Indeed, Ambos Nogales was

literally one community until 1917 when a fence dividing the Arizona from the Sonoran Nogales was erected, resulting in two cities on opposite sides of the border.

2. Although the free trade zones were modified over the years, they generally came to consist of a 20 mile-wide area along each side of the U.S.-Mexico line.
3. Maquiladoras were organized along a twin-plant assembly concept where companies set up plants on both sides of the border. Using this arrangement, U.S. companies send raw materials to assembly plants established in Mexico. Mexico provides cheap labor for production and/or partial assembly of products. Mexico also provides concessions for the use and/or purchase of the natural resources needed by the assembly plants. Partially assembled products are exported back to the U.S side, where the company's "twin-plant" provides final assembly and/or packaging for shipping.
4. This research was funded in part by the National Science Foundation (SBR 9616600).
5. Various ethnographic techniques on a convenience sample of households were used in the research. A combination of participant observation, focused interviews and case study analysis was used to compile household situations, events and social interactions. Focused interviews with women and other household members was informed by the assumption that the decisions about how educational goals are designed and met are intelligible in the context of other kinds of household decisions. By selecting this research strategy, the informants' own words about their reality was captured, as were suggestions about further areas, which could be probed as the research progressed.
6. The proportional growth in the rate of labor-force participation for women during recessionary periods can be understood in light of the household, as society's primary unit of production and reproduction (Netting Wilk & Arnould, 1984).
7. Weintraub (1996) argues that Mexico's 1994 monetary crises was due to Mexico's trade deficit with the U.S., as a result of the rapid growth of U.S. exports to Mexico at the onset of NAFTA.
8. In the U.S., the cost of a full-time employee usually includes certain mandatory costs, such as employee retirement or profit-sharing plans, unemployment insurance, and workman's compensation insurance, many of which can be avoided by hiring persons on a part-time or temporary basis.
9. The word *macho* has been known to have various meanings, depending on the context used. Some of the generalized meanings range from behaviors associated with manly traits (which includes courage, gallantry, and sexual prowess), to the general belief that women should be subordinated to men as head and providers of families. For an at-length discussion of the definitions and contexts in which the term is used, see the volume by Gutmann (1996).

10. Segura distinguishes between Mexican-born immigrant women, whose economic and household roles are often merged, and U.S. born Chicanas, who tend more to dichotomize domestic and employment spheres of activity.
11. This is a common term used to refer to migrants who enter the U.S. without authorization.

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