

# Gender Transformative Odysseys

## Tracing the Experiences of Transnational Migrant Women in Rural Canada<sup>1</sup>

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*Cet article explore les expériences des Mexicaines migrantes qui entrent au Canada sous le programme des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers. On y lit ce que ces femmes vivent dans un environnement dominé par des hommes et l'auteure déplore le fait que les femmes et les hommes n'ont pas la même expérience de migrations entre les pays et plus particulièrement les femmes qui ont des enfants.*

Every year, close to 20,000 men and women from Mexico and the Caribbean come to rural Canada to work as agricultural workers under a temporary employment authorization program known as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program (SAWP). The SAWP has greatly expanded since its inception in 1966, when some 264 Jamaican men were authorized to work in southern Ontario. Despite the fact that the SAWP is highly gendered—over 97 per cent of the foreign labour force is male—scholarly attention to the incorporation of foreign labour in Canadian agriculture has largely neglected to incorporate gender analysis when examining this phenomenon and has used women's numerically small presence to justify all-male samples. It is only very recently that the growing numbers of women and their increasing visibility in rural spaces have instigated the study of women's experiences of migration and the tabling of

gender analysis in the debate (see Barndt 2000; Barrón; Becerril). This paper contributes to efforts to bring to light the experiences of Mexican migrant women in rural Canada and further theoretical understandings of how and why women and men experience migration differently.

### Background

The federal government issues some 20,000 temporary employment visas to foreign workers destined for agriculture every year. The visas allow these non-citizens to stay in Canada for up to eight months, but their permission to work is tied to a single employer. The government refers to the program as a "labour mobility program," but in fact, workers are denied labour mobility. It is precisely this element, made possible by the citizenship status migrant workers are granted, that constitutes these workers as a highly vulnerable labour force. Since workers are in effect tied to their employers and cannot move to more attractive work sites, they have limited bargaining power to press for improved working or living conditions.<sup>2</sup> Employers also have the right to dismiss, and therefore deport, workers at will.<sup>3</sup> Since workers have been repatriated for falling ill, refusing unsafe work, or making complaints related to housing, the threat of repatriation itself

constitutes an effective mechanism of control.

The SAWP operates in nine Canadian provinces, but over 80 per cent of workers are concentrated in Ontario. Although the SAWP is carried out under the federal *Immigration Refugee and Protection Act and Regulations* and implemented within bilateral frameworks of agreement between Canada and the labour source countries,<sup>4</sup> it is governed by provincial statutes with regard to employment standards, labour and health (Verma). Since it is illegal in the province of Ontario for agricultural workers to unionize, the vast majority of Canada's SAWP workers are thus unable to seek the support of labour leaders to represent them before their employers. They are able, however, to contact home country designates, but worker assessments of their representatives have been less than favourable, if not damning (Basok; Binford; Preibisch 2000, 2003; Verduzco). While this may suggest incompetence, labour supply countries are limited in their capacity to represent workers' interests by the very structure of the SAWP that allows employers to choose, on an annual basis, the countries that will supply them with labour, a privilege that disempowers the participating labour-exporting states and leads to heavy competition between them to deliver productive, disciplined work-

ers (Preibisch 2004). Within the current global economy, remittances represent an integral source of foreign exchange for all labour supply countries in the SAWP.

The racialized process of labour replacement can be observed over the SAWP's history that began in 1966 with an international agreement between Jamaica and Canada. Trinidad-Tobago and Barbados became

tions, concerns that formed the basis of our research agenda. To explore these, we employed a range of ethnographic methods including lengthy, in-depth interviews with a non-probability sample of over 32 women in 2002. Interviews with men, employers, and community groups were also conducted. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, tape recorded, and reconstructed through transcrip-

portant gains in revealing how multiple systems of oppression based on social difference—in which gender is but one relation of power—organize the movement of people (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Pessar). In their attempts to engender migration studies, researchers have exposed the importance of gender expectations and responsibilities on migrants' decisions to move (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kanaiaupuni), the gendered nature of social networks in migratory destinations (Goldring; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994); gender differences in the use of remittances (Goldring); and the growing labour demand for migrant women in post-industrial capitalist economies (Bakan and Stasiulis; Chang; Salazar Parreñas). Further, feminists were among the first critics of

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participants a year later, and in 1974 the program was extended to Mexico. Although Mexico was a latecomer, it now accounts for the majority of labour placements, some 57 per cent in 2003. The incorporation of foreign workers in Canadian agriculture is not only highly racialized, involving Southern countries with large populations in moderate to extreme poverty, it is also highly gendered. Women were excluded from the program until 1989, when employers were allowed to hire female candidates and in general, choose the gender of their workers. Today, women—primarily from Mexico—represent approximately three per cent of the workforce. The role of gender in shaping the incorporation of foreign workers is evident in women's relative absence but also their specific insertion in the production process (e.g. packing, canning, pruning) and their concentration within particular commodities (e.g. floriculture, fruit, and food processing).

The incursion of women into a formerly male sphere evokes a number of issues, including gender as a basis for labour incorporation, gendered experiences of migration, and the implications of transnational livelihood strategies for gender rela-

tion, and later coded and analyzed using qualitative software.

In 2002, there were 10,681 Mexicans working in Canada under the SAWP, 339 of whom were women, just over three percent. Although recruitment in Mexico is broadening to include workers from throughout the republic, most of the women come from five key states within close of Mexico City: the State of Mexico, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Guanajuato, and Morelos. Approximately 80 of women are employed in the province of Ontario, predominantly in fruit packing, vegetable greenhouses, and canning/food processing. They are therefore concentrated around the town of Leamington (Essex), the greenhouse capital of North America, and Niagara-on-the-Lake, in the province's fruit belt. Although both of these towns lie within regions of high foreign worker concentration which acts to minimize the social isolation that Mexican workers experience, transportation in rural areas is very expensive. Furthermore, there are a number of women working far from the main catchment areas with little social contact outside the farm.

### **Engendering Migration Studies**

Feminist scholars have made im-

liberal understandings of citizenship ... based on notions of gender-neutral, racially neutral and regionally homogenized individuals who are strangers to each other, rather than differently empowered, positioned and interrelated individuals and communities. (Baines and Sharma 88).

Using this social relational focus, feminists have argued that in the context of growing North/South inequalities, the granting or withholding of citizenship rights serves as a mechanism by which high-income states determine incorporations in labour markets and society in general, including the creation of cheap, vulnerable, and socially excluded workers (Baines and Sharma; Stasiulis and Bakan 1997; Ball and Piper). High-income nation-states not only enjoy the hegemonic authority to selectively bestow mobility rights, but also to make discriminations based on gender, age, or national origin (Stasiulis and Bakan 2003). Under Canada's immigration system, foreign farmers seeking to work in agriculture may qualify as immigrants and enjoy full citizenship rights if

they can prove they have the means to purchase and manage a farm, while those who can demonstrate they are land-poor from designated countries in the South may qualify for temporary wage labour without labour mobility. Predictably, those comprising the former category originate primarily from high income European nations where farmers enjoy considerable state support, while the latter originate from poor countries in the South where neoliberal restructuring has eroded rural livelihoods.

Scholarly efforts to shed light on women's migratory experiences and theorize the role of gender have focused on gendered labour markets in which women predominate. Consider, for example, the sizeable literature dedicated to migrant women and employment in domestic work and caregiving, particularly within Canada (e.g. Arat-Koc and Giles; Bakan and Stasiulus; Chang; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Pratt; Salazar Parreñas). This is not the case for agriculture, a male-dominated occupation, despite the compelling argument in favour of gender analysis to understand the restructuring of agriculture, production relations, and labour flexibility in light of an increasingly globalized food chain (Barndt 2000; Barrientos, Dolan and Tallontire; Lara; Pearson; Reynolds). Deborah Barndt (1999) has argued that the face of the proletariat of the global food system is predominantly female, where women constitute the majority of workers serving agribusiness and food processing industries in the South, and conversely supermarkets and fast food restaurants in the North. Although the "faces" of foreign labour in Canadian agriculture are largely masculine, gender analysis can explore how social relations of power shape and organize migration, work, and agriculture in a global context, the concern to which I now turn.

### Gendered Experiences

The thousands of Caribbean and

Mexican men and women coming to rural Canada every year share a number of experiences as non-citizen agricultural workers. The jobs they fill are generally dirty, difficult, and dangerous. Yet in Ontario, as mentioned previously, both foreign and domestic agricultural workers are excluded from several key labour and employment-related statutes designed to protect workers (Verma).

While most migrants claim that they voluntarily work their allocated hours, a 2003 survey found that over a fifth of workers felt that on occasion they had been asked to work too much (Verduzco). According to Olivia,

*we have to work as long as our employers want. Canadians finish work when they say 'I'm going*

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Further, research on the quality of non-citizen migrants' working and living conditions has found enormous variation between farms, indicating weak regulations and poor enforcement (Preibisch 2003). The significant work-related health and safety risks all agricultural workers face may be greater for foreign workers because they work longer hours, often do not report illnesses/injuries to avoid deportation or losing pay, and do not always receive prompt medical attention when they do report their health concerns (Preibisch 2003). Foreign workers' wages, between \$6.81 and \$7.84 in 2004, are not only low compared to a similar program in the U.S. but subject to a series of deductions, including their airfare, visa, and those deductions Canadian workers normally incur. Foreign workers therefore work longer hours to accumulate greater earnings, an estimated 40 to 70 hours per week, six to seven days per week (Preibisch 2003).

As Olivia,<sup>5</sup> stated:

*I'd like to work more [than ten hours a day] but my body can't do it. It's because we want to take as much advantage of being here as we can in order to save enough and not have to come back.*

*home now,' and don't have any problems. We can't do this or they'll send us home.*

Although men's and women's experiences of labour migration may be shared in the sense that they are non-citizens from the South and farm workers, they differ in significant ways. To begin with, women constitute a very small minority as a result of their historical exclusion and the persistence of gender ideologies in both Canada and the labour exporting countries that define agricultural work (and international migration) as male pursuits. It is not surprising that many women reported initial, intense resistance from their families and communities. As Soledad recalled,

*[my family] put a very tough obstacle in my path. My brothers and one of my sons said, "if you go, don't come back. You will not be able to enter your own home."*

Similarly, Canadian employers' perceptions of women's suitability for agricultural work conform to an agrarian patriarchal culture, in which women are seen as unable to carry out heavy work but suited to those tasks requiring a gentle touch, pa-

tience, and greater care.

Secondly, most of the women face very different material realities than their male counterparts. The women who enter the SAWP are often sole heads of households, owing in part to the fact that Mexican civil servants recruited only single mothers (widowed, separated or divorced) prior to 1998. Single mothers perceived that male migrants derived higher eco-

Women's Canadian earnings allowed them some measure of economic independence and, for some, the opportunity to buy land, build homes, or finance small businesses.

Further, women cited that the key difference in men's and women's experience was that migrant men leave their children in the care of their wives, while women must leave their children with their mothers, female

of each of the last five years, said:

*Sometimes I think that I am of no use to [my children], that they just say, "she is the one sending us money from there, she is the one giving me everything," like an object.*

This sentiment illustrates a fundamental anxiety the transnational

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conomic benefits because of the support from non-migrating female partners, who take responsibility for the family, social networks, the farm and/or business in the migrant's absence. As Micaela stated:

*It is easier for men because they always have the pillar in their house that is their wife. They come, they work, they send money to Mexico and the wife there is the one that takes responsibility for everything. They have land, animals, or they have a store, a business, and the woman works there and they work here. But in the case of women [coming to Canada], the majority of us are single mothers who do not have this opportunity. For us, money sent is money spent because we send money only for the daily expenses of our children and there is no one that supports us economically there.*

Migrating to Canada allowed women to earn substantially more than they would in Mexico, where occupations open to poor women are usually highly contingent, poorly rewarded, and where the social costs of neoliberal restructuring have been borne disproportionately by them.

kin, a neighbour, or at times, an older sibling. Leaving their children engendered significant emotional strain for both men and women. An estimated 40 per cent of Mexican workers spend a larger part of the year working in Canada than in their home communities (FARMS). While all workers spoke of the pain of family separation, women's experiences were perhaps more acute considering that to some degree within all classes in Mexico, and especially in low-income groups, motherhood is the assumed primary adult gender role and carries enormous symbolic power (Logan). While for men, engaging in transnational livelihoods means fulfilling their primary gender role as breadwinners, for women it implies deserting theirs, as it has been traditionally defined. One woman felt that she has not been "a 100 per cent mom" to her child. Another stated that "I've always told myself that my first responsibility is my children, and in that sense I feel that I am not fulfilling it because I'm not with them. This depresses me." Community groups and health professionals working with the migrant community reported high rates of mental health issues, particularly among women (Preibisch 2003). Citlali, a woman working in Canada for eight months

mothers (and fathers) we interviewed experienced, that their migratory periods abroad were negatively affecting their relationships with their children and their children's socialization.

While women expressed considerable anxiety with regard to leaving their children, they were firm in the belief that their decisions were in their children's best interests. In particular, women wanted to provide their children with an education so they would have more choices than they did.

Citlali stated:

*As a woman, alone, you have to fight for your children. In Mexico it is very difficult to raise children, and on your own, it is always very difficult. You have to find a way.*

Thus while women agonized over their decisions to migrate and leave their children, they also saw themselves as fulfilling their gendered responsibilities. Indeed, the women engaging in transnational livelihoods are reinventing gendered expectations of what it means to be a good mother. Similarly, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila report from their research with domestic workers in the U.S.:

Given the uncertainty of what constitutes “good mothering,” and to defend their integrity as mothers when others criticize them, transnational mothers construct new scales for gauging the quality of mothering. (335)

Another key difference in women’s experiences as non-citizen agricultural workers is in terms of their sexuality. Their scant representation among a sea of men means that on the one hand, they have their choice of intimate partners and perhaps greater bargaining power within these relationships than in Mexico, while on the other, they are subject to tremendous efforts to control that power. To explain further, we found that migrating women experienced greater latitude in choosing an intimate partner and more freedom to pursue a relationship than in their home communities, where they have to more carefully abide by the cultural expectations of their gender. Also, women’s spatial separation from the full gamut of gendered responsibilities associated with social reproduction was experienced by some women as liberating, as it enabled them to spend their brief off-work periods on themselves, including the occasional night out dancing. According to one woman:

*In Mexico women have to be more tied to their children: to take them to school, to wash clothes, to iron. But here you just apply yourself to the job and after work you do what you like. There is more freedom.*

Furthermore, women who had formed relationships in Canada, reported that these relationships were more equitable than those with their former male partners in Mexico, although there was evidence that this was not always the case.

The flexibility women were experiencing in the gender roles is not without high social costs. Our research found that migrant women

are considered to be sexually available and are stigmatized within the migrant community in Canada and their own communities. Another woman reported that in Mexico “they think the women that go to Canada are here to prostitute ourselves. They judge us very poorly.” Indeed, women’s participation in transnational migration involves breaking strict gender norms regarding their women’s roles and mobility:

When men come north and leave their families in Mexico ... they are fulfilling familial obligations defined as breadwinning for the family. When women do so, they are embarking not only on an immigration journey but a more radical gender-transformative odyssey. They 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 321).

While in most rural Mexican communities, women face rigid social barriers to leaving their localities unattended or talking to men other than their husbands, women exercising transnational livelihoods in Canada get on a plane, travel thousands of kilometres, and spend eight months unattended and unsupervised. As mentioned, women’s decisions to work in Canada were often met with resistance by their families, including one woman’s brothers who accused her of abandoning her children. Mexican men and women’s own families are not alone in seeking to control women and their sexuality; employers also actively do so. For example, some employers abuse a provision in the SAWP allowing them to set down “farm rules” outlining care of the property and the use of amenities by including rules that forbid female workers to leave the farm, prohibit visitors of the opposite sex, or establish a curfew. These measures

work to reduce non-citizen migrants’ social commitments and further discipline the workforce.

## Conclusion

This brief article provides some insight into the experiences of the Mexican migrant women working in rural Canada, focusing on how experiences of migration are gendered. Although this subject is worthy of more exhaustive treatment, the article serves to further empirical and theoretical understandings of international migration and shed light on women’s livelihoods under contemporary global restructuring within a traditionally male-dominated occupation. In particular, it adds to debates concerning the extent to which the new livelihoods women are engaging in within the contemporary world economy—whether these are found in global factories or the fields of global agriculture—are both emancipating and subjugating, as well as arguments concerning how transnational migration can transform gender relations in unexpected ways. Perhaps as importantly, and for the purposes of this special edition of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, it draws our attention to a group of women who are often absent from our considerations of rural Canadian landscapes.

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<sup>1</sup>The first portion of this title is a quote from Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila. An expanded version of some of the arguments and data presented here is forthcoming in “Women, Migration and Citizenship: Making Local, National and Transnational Connections,” Eds. E. Tastoglou and A. Dobrowolsky (London: Ashgate

Press). I would like to acknowledge the research role of Luz Maria Hermoso in this study and the use of the data that was jointly collected.

<sup>2</sup>Under the SAWP, employers must provide housing for their workers in either privately-owned or rented accommodation.

<sup>3</sup>The disincentive to employers of dismissing workers is the costs of bringing a new worker to the farm (employers are responsible for a portion of the airfare) and sending the dismissed worker home if the employer claims responsibility for the dismissal.

<sup>4</sup>Jamaica (1966); Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados (1967); Mexico (1974) and the member states of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (1976).

<sup>5</sup>All quotes from have been translated from Spanish and in some cases, paraphrased for clarity. All names are pseudonyms.

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## ADEBE DERANGO-ADEM

### music man

my ears  
perk up – razmattaz!  
you are a jazz man  
of apocalypse fingers  
calypso hair  
and debonair while strumming a simple string,  
the flower of your tunes  
consume me like your victim of the hour

and what a fabulous shower of scat  
at that – a fabulous hell it is  
you conjure  
with a slight stare and shifty eyes  
singing magic and bliss  
as I sit,  
patiently with my knees clicking  
to clack with a clock,  
ticking tapping  
waiting for us to  
hit the right note  
and for you to play me  
the song of my life but it seems  
I have found you at a time  
when you gave your body in  
to some dark opera

still I follow your song  
like how a cat observes a piece of smell  
or a moth burns into a lamp  
and then following the light of god  
that was not god's light at all  
I go — snap!

and that's what happens  
when you love a music man –  
always caught in the act  
and swinging forth and back  
you can't listen closely enough  
to the musical detours  
that become the passionate end.

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