



“Back There We Had Nothing to Eat”: The Case of Transnational Food Insecurity

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses migrant food insecurity in the United States from the perspective of Mexican and Central American migrant women. Many describe migrating because they had nothing to eat in their countries of origin. Migration is thus framed as a necessary strategy for overcoming food insecurity. I argue that these women’s perspectives are unique in the migration literature because food security comprises a gendered labour from which men are frequently spared. Unfortunately, food insecurity still prevails in these women’s households in the US. Assuming a “double-duty” workday of earning wages and overseeing care within households, these women experience the added burden of ensuring food security of households “back there.” Thus, I argue that the food practices of Mexican and Central American migrant women provide a unique lens through which to understand the increased feminization of transnational migration from Latin America to other regions of the world.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that food insecurity currently affects roughly forty-nine million people, or close to one-fifth of the US civilian population (Coleman-Jensen, et al. 2011). The USDA conceptualizes and measures food insecurity at the household level and defines it as “uncertain, insufficient, or unacceptable availability, access, or utilization of food” (Wunderlich and Norwood, 2006, p.4). Transnational migrant households are some of the most structurally vulnerable in the US to the conditions of food insecurity while also having the fewest resources for addressing this problem (Quesada et al., 2011).

Since the late 1970s women have migrated from Mexico to the United States in more or less equal numbers to men, and much of this migration is unauthorized (Segura and Zavella, 2007). Eleven million unauthorized immigrants are estimated to be living in the United States (Passel and Cohn, 2011), one-third of whom are women (Segura and Zavella, 2007). Compared to other states, California – the site of my fieldwork outlined herein – has the largest number of foreign-born residents from Latin America and the largest number of unauthorized immigrants employed in its economy (US Census Bureau, 2010; Van Hook et al., 2005).

Ethnographic research on women’s migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States has identified several factors that influence women’s decisions to migrate: desire for reunification with family members; desire for improved economic opportunities; intimate partner violence; and political violence and instability (Boehm, 2012; Chang, 2000; Segura and Zavella, 2007). Women’s levels of education, their prior marital status, and the strength of their social networks in the United States are also important predictors of migration. Food insecurity as a central motive underpinning women’s migration has received much less scholarly attention.

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The weakening of the welfare state brought about by structural adjustment, as well as the inability to compete with cheap agricultural inputs rendered through trade liberalization, has compromised the capacity of rural households around the world to avoid food insecurity. The North American Free Trade Agreement signed in 1994 by the US, Mexico, and Canada, serves as a prime example of mass displacement from neoliberal globalization in the form of free trade policies (Fernandez-Kelley and Massey, 2007). Yet food procurement, preparation, and allocation are inherently social activities through which women may sustain and negotiate relations with others while also asserting some level of influence over these relations (Abarca, 2006; Allen and Sachs, 2007). Feeding and its accompanying labours – what some, including Brenda Beagan (2008), call foodwork – therefore comprise a central aspect of social reproduction. Impediments to these activities have very real social consequences. Being unable to feed one's child, for instance, is deemed tantamount to torture (Van Esterik, 1999, p.230). Women have experienced uneven consequences of neoliberal policy shifts and have had to make “invisible adjustments” along the way.

Scholars of globalization have identified a central contradiction of neoliberal capitalism – namely, that capital and commodities move uninhibitedly across geopolitical borders while the movement of labour is restrained. To this relatively recent discussion in the social sciences I lend the following revision: food, in its commodity form and as a site of capital accumulation, moves uninhibitedly across geopolitical borders while growing numbers of people face fewer and fewer options for guaranteeing their means of survival. In an arrangement that some refer to as the “neoliberal food regime” (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010; for more on “food regimes” see also McMichael, 2009), corporate takeover of the global food system is predicated on a system of values that places profits before people (Nally, 2011). The global reach of this arrangement continues to displace millions from rural agrarian livelihoods who must then migrate as a means to find economic alternatives and to alleviate food insecurity (Carney, 2015).

Taking into account the aforementioned global trends and regional conditions, this study posed the following research questions: 1) What is the lived experience of food insecurity among Mexican and Central American migrant women in the United States, and how does this experience articulate with structural inequalities?; 2) At the local level, how do NGOs and public health practitioners engage in the discourse and practice of “food security,” particularly as it affects Mexican and Central American migrant women?; 3) What do the lived experience of food insecurity and interventions by government and NGO actors reveal about neoliberal governmentality?

METHODOLOGY

The data presented here are derived from 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2011 with Mexican and Central American migrant women (N=25) and private food assistance programmes operating in Santa Barbara County, California. I selected Santa Barbara County as the primary site of my fieldwork for several reasons. The county had one of the highest rates of food insecurity (39% of low-income households) in the state of California (California Health Interview Survey, 2009). In 2011, the leading local hunger-relief organization reported that more than one-quarter of the county’s population sought emergency food assistance. Although food insecurity is a complex problem, much of the problem in Santa Barbara County relates to a high cost of living and relatively low incomes. Poverty in the region has been gradually increasing in recent years; as of 2010, one in five households and one in four children lived at or below the federal poverty level (US Census, 2011).

My fieldwork focused on the lived experiences of migrant women and strategies of intervention to food insecurity, obesity (for further discussion on obesity, BMI, and migration, see Greenhalgh and Carney, 2014), and “diet-related diseases” being administered by NGOs and public health practitioners. I conducted outreach and recruited key informants through established community organizations

in Santa Barbara County which were regularly frequented by local migrant communities, including private food assistance programmes, community centres, and Head Start preschools. Local *promotoras* (community health workers) also assisted with publicizing the project and recruiting participants. Criteria for screening key informants included women of age 18 or older who had migrated from Mexico or Central America and had previous experience utilizing some form of food assistance while in the US. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 60 years (mean age of 38) and originated from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, although the majority of women were from common sending states in Mexico such as Guerrero, Michoacán, and Oaxaca. Five of the women had obtained formal status in the US, including a Guatemalan woman who had been granted asylum, but most (20 out of 25) were “*sin papeles*” (i.e., undocumented). Women’s length of residency in the US spanned from as short as three months to as long as 30 years. All of the women had children, except for one who was in the process of adopting through familial networks in Mexico. The number of reported children averaged two per household. Of the 25 women, 11 had full- or part-time employment, while the remaining 14 were underemployed ($n=9$), supported by a spouse ($n=4$), or on disability ($n=1$). Two of the women reported obtaining post-secondary training at a university or vocational school while the other women had attended only primary school in their countries of origin. In terms of marital status, 16 of the women were married or living with a spouse, four had never been married, and five were divorced.

Semi-structured and life history interviews, dietary surveys, participant observation, and focus groups served as the primary instruments of data collection. My key informants and I determined interview times and locations over the phone and we frequently met in their homes or at parks, schools, and community centres. As a participant-observer, I documented interactions between staff and volunteers of NGOs with migrant women and I accompanied my key informants in some of their daily activities such as grocery shopping, informal work, picking up kids from school, and preparing meals. Toward the end of fieldwork, I organized three focus groups according to women’s area of residence. Focus groups met a total of three times each and were facilitated by an experienced moderator. All interview and focus group interactions were conducted in Spanish. I recorded these interactions with the women’s verbal consent and transcribed the recordings with the help of research assistants who were also native Spanish speakers. The portion of the transcriptions that appear in this article I have translated from Spanish into English.

Santa Barbara County has a long history of labour migration from Latin America, as it was also a major stronghold of Chicano culture following California’s annexation from Mexico in 1848. Today, Latinos account for more than 40 per cent of the local population (out of a total of 423,895), and many households identify Spanish as a first language (US Census, 2010). Santa Barbara County is a coastal region located approximately 100 miles northwest of the city of Los Angeles. Tourism, agriculture, and construction rank among the region’s principal economic activities, employing several thousand migrants annually for work as hotel housekeepers, janitors, cooks, gardeners, farmworkers, and construction workers. During the time of my fieldwork, the local poverty rate was 18 per cent, or about one in five households (up from 11.9% in 2007). Latino households accounted for 69 per cent of total households in poverty (Bureau of Population Statistics, 2010).

The research design posed some limitations, particularly in terms of generalizing results to a larger population. With specific selection criteria for key informants, it was not possible to implement a random sampling design. Hence, my findings are subject to a sampling bias and may not represent the US-based, female migrant population at large.

FOOD INSECURITY “BACK THERE”

The “feminization of migration” refers to the influx of women entering transnational labour markets, specifically as workers in the service economy, a category that includes child care, eldercare,

domestic services, and sex work (see for example Agustin, 2003; Bank Muñoz, 2008; Boris, 2010; Otis, 2011; Parreñas, 2011). While opportunities for employment in the service economy may serve as a “pull” factor in attracting migrant women to the United States, women’s migration narratives suggest that, more than anything, the decision to migrate is informed by destitution and an inability to feed one’s family.

In the context of interviewing women in my research about their experiences of migration, they repeatedly invoked the following phrase in beginning to narrate this process: “*Allá no tenemos nada que comer*” (Back there we had nothing to eat). For most of these women, everyday struggles with material scarcity were epitomized in the form of constraints on feeding and eating.

Linda, a mother of three, found solace in having spared her children from the hunger she knew as a child. Growing up in Michoacán, Linda’s family could not afford to buy any food. Instead, they relied on a diet of *básicos* (basic foods): “If one desires fruit or vegetables, *one must buy them* and our parents didn’t have enough money to buy. We ate almost no meat because it was very expensive. So we ate beans, chillies, tortillas; this is what one ate most because we didn’t have money for fruits and vegetables.” Her father tended to the land and her mother to fruit trees; these activities provided an important source of food for her family despite the unpredictability of harvests. Her parents suffered from different health problems, including diabetes (her mother) and complications from alcoholism (her father). As a child Linda was expected by her mother to clean the house, launder clothes by hand, and iron things for money from others in town. She did not attend school for long because her parents needed the children in her family to work. She recalled the shame of not being able to even afford shoes. At the age of twelve Linda began working in *el campo* (the fields) “*cortando la fresa*” (harvesting strawberries), then broccoli, and later tomatoes. Even with the combined income among her siblings the family was never able to accumulate enough money to buy nutritious food (“*no alcanza dinero para comida nutritiva*”), nor were the children permitted to eat the food that they picked as farmworkers.

Linda was not the only one of her siblings to leave Michoacán in search of a better life; her sister Luisa had migrated, also to Carpintería, for similar reasons. Luisa’s recollections of her childhood, especially in terms of food, mirror those of her sister: *básicos* such as beans, a piece of cheese, chilies in vinegar, *hecho de mano* (hand made) tortillas, and on rare occasions, meat: “Here [in the United States],” she explains, “you don’t lack for an apple, an orange, fruit, anything. In Mexico, it is very different. In Mexico they raised us on beans. When she could, our mom bought us a piece of cheese and chilies in vinegar to add to our meal. . . . When they had money they sometimes bought us soup or meat. But very little meat because it was so expensive and our parents didn’t have the money to buy it for us. We ate whatever there was for us to eat.”

Like her sister, Luisa had helped around the household and attended only a few years of school but was sent to work in the fields at the age of 12. She was 22 years old when she migrated to the United States with her husband, as they were soon going to start a family. By the time they married, her husband had been migrating seasonally between the United States and Mexico for ten years.

Women in my research often shared how the remittances sent home by spouses or extended family members were insufficient for procuring enough food for one’s family. In some instances, women experienced a sudden disruption to the flow of remittances altogether. Malena for instance had no other option but to migrate from the Mexican state of Guerrero to the United States when her husband, who had been living estranged from her for several years, suddenly stopped sending money to the family. When I meet Malena, she is 44 years old, working more than 70 hours per week as a hotel housekeeper and living with her youngest daughter (age four), who has US citizenship by birth. Three of her children (ages 13, 14, and 18) are still living in Guerrero with their grandmother and she has since gone through a divorce from her husband.

Although Malena expresses tremendous grief in being away from her children, she rationalizes her decision to migrate to the United States for the primary reason that she was no longer able to fulfil her responsibilities as a mother while remaining in Mexico. Her husband had forfeited his

obligations to the family by discontinuing financial support and communication, and she had a debt that was accumulating from needing to borrow money to buy food: “The debt that I had there [in Mexico]... this is what was worrying me. So I thought and said, ‘When I am going to pay this money?’ So, I thought and thought only of this, and I had faith and hope that I’d arrive here [in the United States]. Ultimately I was thinking of work because I came to work, to find a job.”

While some of my key informants spoke nostalgically of food practices and traditions in their countries of origin, all of them reported frequent interruptions to food availability and resources to purchase food, and alluded to conditions of food insecurity prior to migrating to the United States.

FOOD INSECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRANT RESETTLEMENT AND THE GENDERED LABOUR OF FOOD SECURITY

Feminist scholars discuss the “double-duty” workday of women who are employed in wage-labour and who shoulder the bulk of domestic chores and childcare needs (Allen, 2007; Beagan, 2008). They also underscore the intrinsic inequalities that give caring labour its structure and meaning as it traverses the spectrum of women’s lived experiences; as JaneMaree Maher notes, “Women’s work in unpaid care is crucial to functioning societies, but the requirement to give this care and the conditions for it affect differently located women in different ways” (2010, p. 21). In the United States, the reproductive labours of low-income women have historically been constrained by low-wage labour and other structural disadvantages that create serious tensions around maintaining employment, caring for children, balancing household resources, seeking social services, and enduring discrimination (Dodson, 2007). Foodwork, i.e., the procurement, management, and allocation of food, comprises a significant portion of the labour associated with social reproduction performed by women for which they do not typically receive monetary compensation (Beagan, 2008). Consequently, overseeing “food security” comprises a gendered labour that disproportionately burdens women. Unfortunately, migrant women often find that the conditions of food insecurity that underpin one’s decision to migrate frequently prevail while living in the US. In addition to the “double-duty” workday of performing wage-labour and reproductive care within one’s own household, these women are also preoccupied by a “third labour”: caring for the food security of households “back there.”

Notably, my fieldwork overlapped with the peak of the recent economic recession in the US. Women perceived recent changes in the economy differently depending on how long they had been residing in the US. Women with longer residency (i.e. more than five years) recalled better economic times, whereas more recent residents were surprised by the lack of employment opportunities. More recent arrivals expressed much disappointment in finding an unfortunate economic situation that contradicted what they had previously learned through transnational social networks.

Tina (age 49, from Sinaloa) for instance, remembered vast employment opportunities when she arrived with her mother and two sisters in California over 30 years ago. She worked in a series of clerical and factory jobs prior to going on disability status. She alluded to the ways that the economy had changed:

Before I think there was much more work and it was better than today. Today there are many people who are unemployed or there is no work and the economy has worsened. But before employment was better. It could be because the economy fell. Others say it is very difficult to find work. Like, I have a son who has been without work for four months. It’s difficult because many businesses are not accepting [applications] – well, they are accepting – but they aren’t offering anything because there is no place for work.

Juliana (age 38, from Guerrero), living in the US for 12 years, reported observations similar to those of Tina:

Right now the economy is poor and it's difficult to buy food. We have to pay \$500 in rent, and although we have to pay it, we also have to eat. So before there was more work. It was easier to find work in those times, when the economy was still good. Now it is difficult. Many people cannot find work. I stopped working when I was pregnant. But after my pregnancy, to earn something, I had to...I started to babysit and that was going well. Babysitting for people I knew, but now there aren't even babysitting jobs. Sometimes I watch this girl, once in a while, but today for instance the woman was called off from work [so she didn't need me]. There isn't much work now in comparison with before.

Juliana, among others, interpreted declines in demand for domestic and hospitality services as a result of the market becoming increasingly saturated with competition. Natalia lamented reductions in her work schedule for reasons that, "There is a lot of competition in house cleaning. Many women want to clean houses. And there isn't a lot of work [for them]." Celina (age 36, from Veracruz), working as a hotel housekeeper, reported a reduction of hours in her work schedule: "Before I was given 80 hours [per every two weeks] and now I only have 70 and this is less money for me. There are people who only work two days a week and this adds up to very few hours every two weeks [when one is paid]."

Women with husbands noted the ebb and flow of demand for labourers in construction: "My husband works [in construction] but doesn't work very often. There are times when there is a lot of work and times when there is no work," (Celeste, age 25, from Guerrero). Dora (age 35, from Honduras) worried about her husband's temporary contracts with different construction companies, and unanticipated interruptions to these contracts: "When the rain came we worried [because they don't work when it's raining]."

Despite the struggle to *make* a living, migrant women did not perceive any changes in the *cost* of living, thereby posing serious constraints for household resources: "Many families complain that the money doesn't accumulate, especially now that work has dropped and meanwhile the rent and other bills do not drop. My husband works but he is only able to save for the rent," (Celina, age 36, from Veracruz). Celina also believed that the high cost of living related to Santa Barbara's tourism-centric economy: "Right now we are in a situation, a crisis, of no work. Santa Barbara is a beautiful city, but as a tourist destination, it is very expensive to live here. I'd like to live alone here, but I can't because the rent is too expensive."

In responding to my question of whether or not they perceived fewer barriers to food procurement since coming to the US, many women in my research answered along the lines of Betanía (age 62, from Guerrero): "A little better. Or not. I think sometimes yes, sometimes no." Such ambivalence and ambiguity about improvements to access to nutritional sources prevailed throughout women's accounts of struggles with feeding and eating, and reflected the diverse array of economic, social, political, and temporal constraints that confronted migrant women on a daily basis.

Balancing resources in the context of economic precarity

The recession of 2008 coincided with a global food crisis characterized by high food prices that caused food riots and rebellions around the world (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009). Rising prices of staple grains in recent years have been linked to growing demand for animal-products (and thus livestock feed) in countries such as India and China, competition for use of crops as biofuels, record oil prices, and market speculation on commodity crops (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2009). In the US, the consumer price index for food is higher than for all other items except for energy, a trend that has continued since immediately prior to the 2008 recession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The index for food in 2011 increased by 4.7 per cent compared to a 1.5 per cent increase in 2010, (see NBER National Bureau of Economic Research 2008). Moreover, US Midwest farmland – the nation's largest

source of commodity crops – hit a 35-year record value in 2011, translating to temporary gains for farmers but higher food prices for consumers (Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 2012).

As price was the ultimate determinant in purchasing decisions, my key informants expressed a particular sensitivity to food prices: “Price comes first, you always go for the items on special,” (Maya, age 26, from Guerrero). Consistent with unprecedented increases in global food prices during recent years (Egal et al., 2009; Baker, 2008; Katz, 2008; Mittal, 2009), Olivia recalled a moment when rice, a central staple for her household, was unobtainable: “People are worried when prices go up. Because when food prices increase, like rice when it is scarce, and they see the prices increase by four or five dollars, this represents a real problem.” She surmised that “people begin to eat less” in the midst of these price increases.

Food procurement in the context of economic crisis could require many hours of investment, as women sought “*las especiales*” (bargains) through visiting multiple stores. Juliana (age 38, from Guerrero) for instance, preferred to plan her meals spontaneously around the best deals she could find. Everyday, after dropping her children off at school, she would begin her walk around town to survey prices at the stores within closest proximity to her home. She was always looking to “*aprovechar las especiales*” (take advantage of specials). Sometimes prior to her mid-morning walkabout, she would leaf through coupon books that arrived in the mail. Knowing about the specials in advance could save her some time, as without access to a car or someone to drive her, the journey between stores to compare prices was very time consuming.

Some of my key informants discussed the notion of *comidas limitadas* (literally translated as limited foods, but referred to items such as meat, eggs, fruit, and some vegetables), whose scarcity impeded efforts toward *comida saludable* (healthy meals). As it was explained to me, *limitada* referred to quality, rather than quantity, of food sources: “We eat enough, but of basic things [*básicos*]”; “There is a lot of food even though it may not be nutritious. Like there are many potatoes and this we use in many ways, in tacos, in tortillas, you can do a lot with these, so there is never a shortage of food.” *Limitadas* enhanced the nutritional value of *básicos* (basic foods). Brenda (age 56, from Cuernavaca) explained that *básicos* comprised the foundation of a healthy diet but needed to be combined with *limitadas* for optimal nutrition: “I think that tortilla, *chile*, and the bean are at the foundation of our ways of eating...and an egg or a piece of meat when things are going well.” Conversely, many women perceived a persistent reliance on rice and beans, and in some cases, tortillas, bread, and milk, as inadequate for maintaining proper health. Some of my key informants surmised the possible health consequences of such a diet, often bringing up concerns about obesity and diabetes. In short, procuring and rationing of *comida limitada*, proved a challenge (for examples of such research, see discussion of the gendered cost of food in Carney 2011).

My key informants noted having to *balancear* (*balance*) economic and material resources, including carefully rationing foods within the household. For instance, Brenda perpetually worried that food would not last between pay checks, thus compelling her to ration foods with extra scrutiny: “It gives me much shame to be without food. One is always thinking of how to get what one needs for tomorrow. For example, if I buy a chicken, I always divide it in half, half for one day, half for the next day. So yes, one is worried that food will run out.”

Aside from issues of access to specific foods, a lack of time posed constraints for *comida saludable* as women described other productive and reproductive labours (i.e. formal and informal work, cleaning, childcare, laundry, and shopping) as infringing on time to prepare meals and on the availability of family and extended social networks to convene around meals. Despite gaining access to a wider variety of foods and realizing certain material improvements since migrating from Mexico 20 years ago, Carolina (age 46, from Guerrero) described consuming fewer and smaller meals:

In Mexico we had three meals per day. In Mexico you had a little milk with tortillas that could be for breakfast or lunch. In the afternoon, [you had] your *comida*, and in the evening, [you had] your dinner. Here no more than one meal and no more than bread and milk in the morning...I think it

is because of how busy people are, because one is always out and not at home. In Mexico it's nice because even if you are poor you eat [with others] and with three meals.

In Mexico and much of Central America, the *comida* is the main meal of the day, marked as a time for both nourishing oneself and socializing with others. Carolina distinguished between the everyday *comida* and other instances of eating that did not necessarily comprise a "meal", the latter indicating a more common practice among recent immigrants in the US.

"The work of a mother"

In comprising a gendered labour, the practice of caring through food demands women's physical and emotional labours (DeVault, 1991). Women in my research strived to oversee this practice through the provision of foods they deemed as "*saludable*" (healthy). Yet these healthier foods were usually more time-intensive. Despite the demands of wage-earning activities that limited the amount of time women could devote to meal preparation, working mothers absorbed a litany of purported "failures" in the realm of food provisioning as they were targets of intense social scrutiny.

Gloria, who much to her dismay had migrated with her husband and their children to the United States in 1998, believed that a woman's place was in the household. She engaged in some income-generating activities such as offering laundry services, selling prepared foods, and providing child care, all from the comfort of her own home. Being a mother, she explained, required such arrangements: "I've never worked because I had three little girls. My husband also never wanted [me to work]; he said, 'You're going to work and what is going to become of these girls?'"

Linda also pursued income-generating activities but described herself as unemployed. In addition to offering laundry services from her home she left the house once every week for a housecleaning job. Linda deemed these income-generating activities as worthy of pursuing only if they melded easily into her routine, which she elaborated as follows:

I get up and take my husband to work. I come back and wake up the kids to take them to school. I feed them breakfast, make them a snack for the day, usually fruit. I return from school and clean the house. I go to the store if I need something for the *comida*. Afterward, I wash the clothes if they need washing. At one o'clock I pick up the little one from kindergarten. I pick up my other child at 4:30. My husband comes home and I feed everyone dinner. I wash the dishes, clean the kitchen, bathe my children and read them a book, and then go to sleep.

Instead of portraying themselves as fully employed, I found that these women framed their income-generating activities through less explicit terms, aligning with what Patricia Zavella has described as *informal work*: "Informal work allows women to combine domestic and wage labour by keeping an eye on children... or organize their tasks so they can perform household chores in between work for wages" (Zavella, 2011 p.99). Married women like Gloria and Linda, perhaps privileged by their partners' incomes, were more inclined to view staying at home as a mother's duty.

Among women who benefited from the financial support of a spouse there were concerns about the possibility of children of working mothers being deprived of adequate care, which was frequently framed in terms of food. Olivia, for instance, described working mothers as too relaxed about their children's diets. "The problem that children eat junk food is the problem of [a mother]," she commented. "We have to find options to buy better food or to make food at home. Because here, in this country, as mothers work, it is easier to buy prepared food or to take your kids to McDonald's. But it depends on how you, as a mother, provide them healthy food." In attributing the absence of a mother to more regular consumption of unhealthy food among children, Olivia aligned with other women who viewed caring for children as a woman's responsibility, thereby

directing blame at women when such care was not available. Notably, there were not significant differences in subjective evaluations of food insecurity among women who had the support of a spouse versus those who did not.

Informal status and access to nutritional resources

Dora began each day praying for the opportunity to acquire formal residency status because it would mean she could bring to the US her two children, aged ten and twelve, who were still living with her mother in Honduras. She arrived from Honduras as an unauthorized migrant in 2005 and met her Mexican-born husband while working part-time as a housecleaner in Santa Barbara. Since living in the US, Dora and her husband had two more children, ages two and five. She clung to the hope that her husband would be able to obtain papers for both of them through his employer, who had supposedly broached the subject on several occasions. With these papers she could feasibly end the six years of separation from her children in Honduras.

My conversations with Dora about her children in Honduras were always very emotional. She meditated on her present feelings of isolation and she grieved intensely for the children she left behind. She explained the trade-offs of providing care to her US-born children versus mothering from across borders:

I'm here with them [my US-born children] so that I am not a disgrace to them; it hurts. It would hurt so much if one day [my children in Honduras] said to me "this and this [bad thing] happened"... it would hurt me very much. I don't want to hear bad things from them; I think to remind myself to look after them all equally. Here I miss everyone... I miss them all because I'm here. And I tell them, "I can't send much money, we are in a very ugly situation," but even if I send them only a little each month, I know that my children are safe and fed because my mother is taking care of them.

Dora's words echoed the sentiments of other mothers in my research who experienced guilt in trying to reconcile the disparities in quality of life and care dictated by the presence of geopolitical borders. Dora regretted being unable to send much money to her children in Honduras, but she found some solace in knowing that her mother was looking after them and feeding them. Although she feared that her children there could grow up to resent her, she was hopeful that she could unite everyone in her family through the documentation process. As we hugged goodbye on the day before Christmas Eve, Dora reminded me to cherish time with my family stating as she wiped tears from her eyes, "It is not a life to have your family split in two places." Dora remained optimistic about the possibility of formal status, even forgoing forms of assistance that her US-born children qualified for, such as food stamps; she feared that asking for help would jeopardize her prospective application for legal residence and thus her ability to bring her other children over safely. In such a way the wellbeing of her US-born children was tethered to her own undocumented residency status and to the uncertain future of her children in Honduras.

For women such as Dora who lacked formal status, conditions of "illegality" – "the erasure of legal personhood...a space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression" (De Genova, 2002) – hindered them from contesting the circumstances that obstructed their ability to provide healthy food. Women conveyed frustration in feeling unable to communicate with authorities on this issue, as one woman expressed, "*no tenemos facilidad*" (we don't have this privilege). Persistent concerns and uncertainty about one's future, exacerbated by the possibility of deportation, prevented many women from planning for the long-term. Reports of record deportations and rumours about ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) informants living among them in their communities, contributed to migrant women's fear of surveillance by the state. They frequently avoided social services even if they or their children were eligible because of ambiguity

around terms of enrolment and the potential uses of client information. For these reasons, women articulated a desire for outreach programmes specifically tailored to the needs of undocumented migrant communities, that would delineate the range of social services available to them in “*nuestra idioma y nos orientaría*” (in our language and that would orient us).

Formal status or lack thereof has palpable consequences for eligibility and participation in welfare programmes. Since 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) has limited undocumented individuals’ access to public aid, including food stamps, federal welfare, and Social Security. While undocumented immigrants are barred from participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), they are eligible to apply on behalf of any US-born children. Pregnant women or women with children under age 5 may also apply to the Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program. However, low enrolment in government food assistance programmes among im/migrant groups and Latinas in particular has been explained by the potential stigmas associated with participation (Kaiser, 2008) and the perceived risk of becoming a public charge that could affect eligibility when petitioning for legal status, even though the USDA explicitly dismissed this notion in early 2010 (Vauthier, 2011). Emergency food providers who participated in my research repeatedly explained that im/migrants often defer to emergency food as their primary or only line of defense against food insecurity (for discussion of how women utilized such programs, see Minkoff-Zern and Carney, 2015).

Women also expressed discomfort with the social stigma attached to their undocumented status that contributed to experiences with discrimination. Women were subject to discrimination in a variety of settings ranging from the most mundane, such as the checkout line at the grocery store, to the exceptional, such as a visit to the emergency room. For instance, Dolores painfully recalled being humiliated by hospital staff in front of her son when she brought him to the emergency room with a broken arm. They had ridiculed her for ostensibly coming to the US to exploit public programmes such as MediCal (California’s version of Medicaid, a social insurance program) when indeed she was paying for her son’s health insurance. Such experiences of discrimination contributed to feelings of shame (*vergüenza*) among women and deterred them from seeking help.

Women’s experiences of “illegality” also interacted with and exacerbated extant constraints on financial resources, isolation from social networks and families, and abusive relationships with spouses to heighten levels of stress sometimes then yielding to general malaise or in more severe cases, depression. In reflecting on high levels of stress, women in my research reported common symptoms of depression such as chronic exhaustion, feelings of helplessness, loss of appetite, or its opposite – a tendency toward binge eating. In addition, almost all of the women in my research conveyed that they were struggling to maintain an overall positive attitude toward life. Findings from a preliminary phase of research that preceded this particular phase of the project suggested that women were most acutely attuned to the stress of household food insecurity and often attempted to hide the problem from other household members (see Carney, 2011). Thus, it is likely that a focus on men’s experiences with food insecurity, particularly in mixed-status families, would generate different results.

CONCLUSION

In performing reproductive labours both prior to and after migrating, my key informants were constrained by different political-economic conditions. They articulated the experience of mothering from the opposite side of the border as a pervasive and relentless source of suffering, as was also the inability to continuously provide adequate resources to children in the United States. Women’s worries about household food supply in the United States served as painful reminders of past

experiences with food scarcity in one's country of origin and suggested that conditions of poverty and marginalization persisted on both sides of the border.

Despite the extent to which people are motivated to migrate out of concerns for health, and contrary to what might be surmised from the "immigrant health paradox", emerging research suggests that migration is actually harmful to one's health. As Carolyn Sargent and Stephanie Larchanche argue, "Immigration status – documented or undocumented – has significant implications for migrant health and access to health services" (2011, 347). Instead of finding improved access to more affordable and adequate health services, Sarah Willen et al. emphasize the ways that "'illegality' often places im/migrants in positions of considerable health risk" (2011, 336). As an aspect of their "illegality," unauthorized migrants are viewed as undeserving, and "it is their construction as an illegitimate social group which in fact hinders their access to health care and produces ill health" (Larchanche, 2012, 858). Indeed, the conditions of chronic food insecurity pose an array of threats to health, broadly defined. Women seeking an alternative to these conditions through the process of migration arguably absorb additional health risks when the conditions of food insecurity do not subside with migration but rather complicate one's ability to perform foodwork in transnational migrant households.

Resistance on the part of nation-states toward creating a category of "economic refugees" alongside "political refugees", as well as the refusal of many nation-states to recognize the impact of free trade agreements on livelihoods elsewhere, attest to how the political and the economic are often imagined as separate and distinct spheres. Certain conditions impelling people to migrate, such as war, religious persecution, or severe illness, tend to elicit more moral sympathy than do poverty, hunger, or unemployment. With moral logics shaping conceptualizations of deservingness, not everyone who migrates is deemed worthy of entry. For a variety of unnamed reasons, food insecurity has not been recognized as a legitimate basis for seeking authorized entry into countries such as the United States. As long as food policies and global food system governance are disarticulated from economic development goals, we will continue to witness the undermining of millions, if not billions, of livelihoods. Beyond critiques of current "food regimes," we must also address how the environmental effects of past and current regimes are contributing to mass displacement. Climate change has already been noted to intensify food crises around the world. Similarly, then, as long as human rights legislation is disarticulated from immigration policies, we will inevitably witness the repeated violations of millions across the globe.

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