

BEREA COLLEGE

Women and Migration:

Gender Roles among Mexican Immigrants to the U.S.

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Introduction

The topic of migration has been part of the agenda of many nations. The movement of people, and the regulation of these flows, are what nations are concerned with and rightly so, since additional members to their society can have economic, political, and social impacts. Extensive research has been made on the topic of immigration from Mexico but only a very small part of that research has focused on women as a significant part of the equation. Kanaiaupuni in her article entitled, "Reframing the Migration Question: An Analysis of Men, Women, and Gender," stated that the continuous flow of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. increasingly involves women (1314). The role of women and its impact on migration needs to be taken into consideration to further understand migration and its effects. It is important to understand how gender relations are affected by the act of immigrating to the U.S. Emilio Parrado and Chenoa Flippen in their publication entitled, "Migration and Gender among Mexican Women," sought to answer whether the "more liberal climate [in the U.S.] drives the evolution of gender structures" (24). In other words, what other factors need to be addressed in order to find out what causes change in gender relations? Differing views on the effect migration has on gender relations has been discussed by scholars and differing conclusions and results have been reached. The focus of this paper is to understand how these roles do change.

Immigration into the United States has been constantly changing to meet demands in the labor sector. Several guest worker programs were attempted in the past to meet these demands. Douglass Massey and Zai Liang wrote of the effects of the Bracero Program sponsored by the federal government which in the course of its history imported some 4.5

million Mexican workers into the United States, “making it the largest temporary worker program in U.S. history” (200). This trend in guest worker programs generally imported workers in the agriculture sector. Moreover, Mexico has been and continues to be the nation from where most immigrants come into the U.S. Immigration to the U.S. has exponentially increased and according to the Center for American Progress Action Fund, a think-tank devoted to the melioration of the American people, released in 2008, 14.4 million Latinas resided in the U.S. and 52% of these were foreign born (website). In light of this, it is important to note that in the data pertaining to patterns and numbers of immigrants in the U.S., most researchers do not consider women when analyzing the flow of migrants. Many of the scholars who pursue research pertaining to gender and migration mention the need to record and analyze the relationship between these two variables. Cerrutti and Massey found that among undocumented migrants, the percentage of females leaving Mexico rose from 11 percent during 1959-1965 to 28 percent in 1990-1995 (187). More recent research does not reflect women in their data. In addition, gathering data concerning unregulated migration can have its own complication since irregular entries into American soil are not recorded. It is very difficult to account for the people who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally.

Despite the scarce research available on Mexican women with regards to migration and gender roles, significant literature has more recently been attributed by authors such as Parrado and Flippen. In order to answer how gender roles are affected, Mexican women’s level of authority, education levels, and employment will be considered as potential elements which cause significant change in gender roles. I also find important to

address how change in turn influences the experience and position of women in the U.S.

The following section will provide a background of the patriarchal norms in Mexico and an analysis of how these norms are challenged by factors caused by migration.

Patriarchal Duality

The notion of patriarchy, aside from being the norm in many societies, varies from culture to culture. The Mexican husband is portrayed as "an authoritarian, patriarchal figure who is head and master of the household and, who enjoys the highest status in the family" and the wife is depicted as submissive and faithful, shunning the public sphere to fulfill her domestic responsibilities (Parrado and Flippen 607). Patriarchy, as concept applying to men and women, seeks to ostracize and devalue women through a tenet, which renders females as inferior. Often times traditional gender roles in some cultures create a wall between women and society. For example, women are not expected to find employment but rather become dependent on their husbands. A rather important consideration is the set of challenges posed towards patriarchal gender relations when immigration becomes a part of the equation. The patriarchy duality immigrants encounter due to their relocation to the U.S. causes tension between the patriarchal norms from Mexico and that of the U.S. A different atmosphere compounded with different gender norms and other conditions affects the interaction between individuals, which can affect gender roles. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo in her article entitled, "Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men," addresses the changes that occur to gender relations based on the challenges migrants face in the U.S. When migration is added to the equation, gender relations and the

inequities involved can be exacerbated due to the different roles women play once they have immigrated. What is often portrayed in Mexican novelas is just this. Novelas are the equivalent of soap operas that tend to create the story of migrants and the struggles they deal with. The novela exaggerates the challenges migrants but also shed some truth on the reality many migrants face. Much of the struggle is finding a job but more importantly assimilating to their new home in the U.S. But this ultimately depends on each case because one woman could take a more active role in the contribution to the family and thus have a more authoritative role, whereas another takes care of the home and cares for the children and thus lessens her influence on the power structure. The experience of the immigrant has dictates what challenges he/she has confronted and ultimately has a different experience than other migrants. To meliorate this problem, indicators have been chosen to test which affects gender roles significantly. This in turn will allow for an analysis of these indicators and how it is that they transform gender roles.

But another set of cases that will be considered will be when the man leaves his partner in Mexico. The role of the non-migrant woman becomes that of a provider and she actually begins to live as the authority in the household. I find it important to consider not only how gender roles change in the Mexican community in the U.S. but also when the wife stays in the home country. Migration causes these roles to experience pressure both in Mexico and in the U.S. The pressures are seen as the woman encounters inequality and injustice within the hegemonic system in Mexico. This is manifested in not finding a good-paying job and having to maintain a balanced budget to ensure everyone in the family is fed and the bills are paid. Some try to find the means to emigrate due to the poverty and

overall underdeveloped infrastructures found in Mexico. A major incentive is the prospects of providing an education to children. The net effect of women who were left behind is the hegemonic position they begin to hold due to their new found independence. Gender roles start to change to some degree and new gender relations are formed. What is interesting is how patriarchal norms have in a sense blinded or disabled women from fully understanding the process of migration. Women until more recently have not been involved in understanding or being part of the migration networks that surface due to constant need to emigrate. The creation of these networks between women could be understood as a milestone for empowering women. But due to the fact that migration has been controlled and understood by men, women migration networks have taken a long time to develop.

But in order to further dissect how gender roles are affected by migration, the following indicators will be discussed to understand which signify greater change in gender relations. The level of authority, the education level, and the employment that women possess can affect gender roles and will be analyzed in the following sections to further understand how these roles change.

Level of authority

The rationale behind considering the level of authority of Mexican women possess is derived from the understanding of the patriarchal society present in Mexico. Even though the relativity of the concept of a patriarchal society is taken into account, some of its characteristics can be regarded as viable across the nation. David Stanistreet et al explains a patriarchal society must be one whereby women are dominated by men and a

domination of men by other men (873). In other words, a patriarchal society is described by the level of authority or power given to men over women. Society being strongly patriarchal can have an immense influence on the shaping of gender roles men and women possess. If women are thought as inferior, then they will be treated as lesser than men. The common example in Latin America is the strong belief that a woman must remain faithful and committed to her marriage. The value system is such that men are not reprimanded by society as women are. Some of the societal norms in Mexico could be considered backwards, unfair, or disrespectful in the U.S. and the influences the new culture will have on gender roles will either strengthen or weaken those sociological tendencies. The level of authority will be measured by the influence women have in the decision-making process but also how the new environment and the clash between societal norms can affect woman's authority. The level of authority will lend itself as an indicator of the changing gender roles.

In "Migration and Relationship Power among Mexican Women," Emilio Parrado et al use the term relationship power synonymously with level of authority and make conclusions about other personal factors that can be influential to gender roles. The two terms are similar in that they deal with the power structure between women and men. One example of how authority wavers is explained by Parrado, whereby he deduces that legal as opposed to consensual unions tend to increase women's control over relationships (5). This is because legal unions exalt higher levels of commitment and accountability for care and maintenance of the offspring, which in turn shift the balance in favor of women. And the root of these power dynamics is found in the stronghold the Church has had on the

societal norms worldwide. It introduced a set of values which would affect the relationships of those who adhered to its teachings. The involvement of the Catholic Church is a significant factor to consider but will be left for further researchers to investigate. Karen Oppenheim Mason's assessment of women's position in the hegemonic structure hones on the level of authority and how it can be affected by different variables, some of them being fertility rates and economic position. Women's economic dependency "may enhance the value of sons as risk assets and the value of children as protection against marital disruption or as securers of status or power within the family" (Mason 732). Her work entitled, "The Impact of Women's Social Position on Fertility in Developing Countries," focuses on the theoretical aspect of gender relations from different developing nations with a focus on fertility as a factor affecting power dynamics. The only fallback to her work is its broad nature, disabling the researcher to objectively and correctly describe a particular ethnic group such as the Mexican woman. Mason concludes that "the extent to which women have autonomy from men's control in their day-to-day lives or are economically independent from male family members has been argued to affect their age at marriage, their desires for children, the costs of children, and the use of contraception" (738). It is safe to say the effect economic dependency has on women's levels of authority is reflected by the influence or control the man has in the relationship in the decision-making. The economic dependency on the man seems to be an important factor in determining whether it is beneficial for the woman to have children. For if the woman was overly dependent on the economic contribution, then the higher fertility rate would cause the level of authority or power of the woman to lower because domestic demands will

undermine women's ability to challenge patriarchal norms (Parrado, Flippen, and McQuiston 350). Despite the generalizations that are made across cultures, I find both articles to connect and ultimately convey a more accurate representation of migrant women in the U.S. The reason this is so is due to the focus of Parrado et al on the Mexican woman and her role as a woman in foreign soil as it conflicts with societal norms in a more developed nation.

Researchers have struggled with the idea that just because immigrants enter the U.S., easily finding employment, and establishing a firm place in the hegemonic structure, that gender roles will start to dissipate or levels of authority will be interchanged. Parrado and Flippen concluded that the utopian perception of the U.S. does not necessarily lead to a change in gender relations and norms but it is, "rather the interaction between migrants' characteristics and the social environment in which they operate" (23). They understood that the effects of migration on gender as being "complicated by important interactions between the effects of employment, social support, and context on women's position" (Parrado and Flippen 23). I find their work to make sense to the individual who is a migrant or understands the difficulties they face. For example unemployment of a woman can cause tension in families because of how the household duties will be divided or reassigned. Parrado and Flippen have a point in that it is the climate or interaction with different individuals who have differing backgrounds and moral standpoints that causes roles between women and men to alter themselves. In our daily lives, we encounter people who shape how we think about the world around us and about ourselves. Silvia Pedraza, in "Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender," would agree with Parrado in

Flippen since she states research on immigrant women needs to consider the private world versus the community. The public sphere may conditionally allow more freedoms but is restricted by negotiations and norms formed in the private sphere. Individuals in society, both in the private and the public spheres will indirectly or directly shape the immigrants lives and consequently, the gender roles of the immigrants in their recently established home. Negotiations of gender roles occur when the migrant allows other's gender norms to infiltrate or challenge his or hers.

Mason does well to introduce the importance of the status of women relative to that of men. Several of her hypothesis seek to pronounce that the ability of women's engagement in alternative activities to childbearing and caring increases the chances that they will gain autonomy (Mason 733). These activities include education and employment which will be discussed later in this paper. Furthermore, Parrado et al agree that it is not merely absolute resources that determine power in relationships and structure gender relations but the position of women with respect to men (Reshaping the Migration 350). Wolf et al in their work entitled, "Who Decides: Women's Status and Negotiation of Sex in Uganda," conclude that having a partner who is a much older or better educated tends to reduce a woman's overall position in the relationship and to diminish her bargaining power (317). They found education to be the most consistent indicator of an enhanced bargaining ability. Education allows women the opportunity to become professionals, which will allow them to become independent and shed the patriarchal norms of their predecessors. The following section will focus on the education of migrant women,

specifically of Mexican descent, and will be analyzing how education levels can affect gender roles.

Education Levels

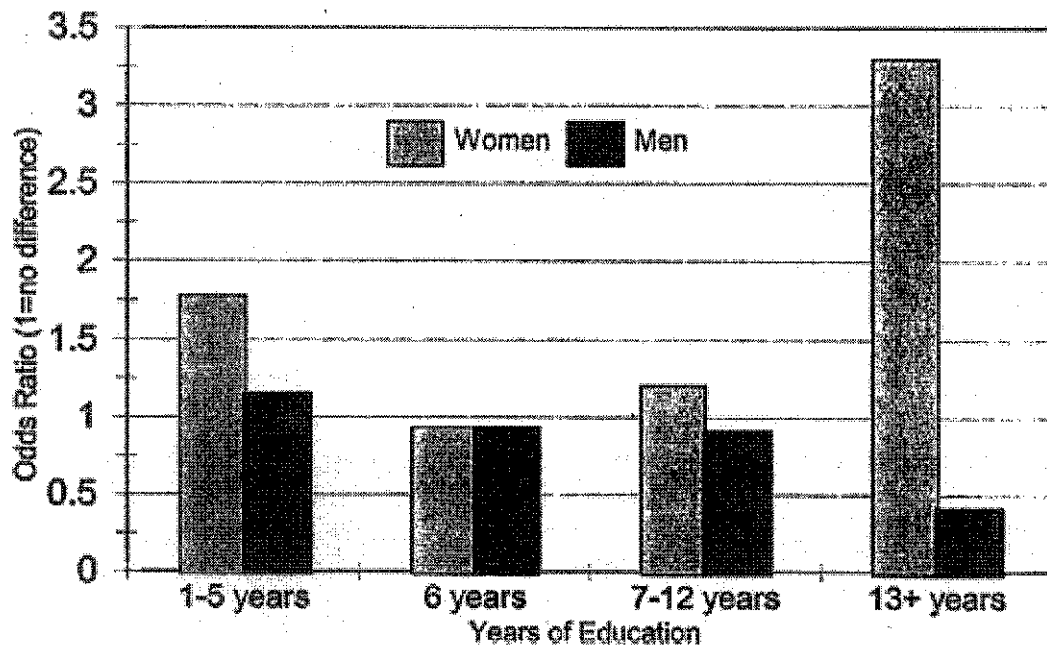
The level of education of migrant women needs to be taken into consideration since much of the immigration of the U.S. has led to a significant number of those migrants seeking to partake in the availability of education. In Latin America, a lower percentage of women than men enroll in the equivalent of high school in the U.S. Jayne Howell states that the current trend is that more women are pursuing professional and vocational degrees (Expanding Women's Roles 100). The school systems in Mexico usually include elementary school, which is first through sixth grade, junior or senior high schools, universities or vocational programs (Howell 104). But free education ends after elementary and challenges to further educate young adults exist. Part of the problem has been that mandatory and free education ends after six years of schooling. So in turn, education becomes an incentive for immigrants find education to increase their competitiveness but also provide education for their children. When the migrant enters illegally, it adds a different level of difficulty since education is limited for undocumented immigrants. This has caused their inability to fully participate in many aspects of society compared to their legal resident counterparts. Being undocumented creates a tension of its own since the fear of being deported back to their country is constantly being reminded to them by the media. For women, the ability to become educated and successful individuals could be a gateway to weaken the hold of the patriarchal norms from their country and allow for

progressive atmospheres for both women and men. But this could potentially have varying effects when legal status is considered. For the legalized woman, being educated could open greater doors than if she is undocumented. William Perez in his book entitled, We Are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream, states that the educational rights of undocumented students end after compulsory school age and an estimated 3.4 million students between the ages 18 and 19 are unable to pursue their dreams (xxv). A woman who has become naturalized or was born on American soil has the financial opportunities available for residents of this nation, a “pot” not accessible to undocumented immigrants. Due to the complexity of the varying legal status a person has, the interactions with family members and how education affects gender roles will be examined and the question of status will be acknowledged but not considered extensively.

The prospect of obtaining an education, for much of the migrants from the developing world, has been more than an incentive to immigrate to more developed countries. Donato and Kanaiaupuni found education to be positively correlated to the likelihood of U.S. migration among Mexican women and for men the relationship is typically less correlated (218). What I can gather from this data is that men are more concerned with generating enough income for their family in the U.S. or family left behind. For the migrant, depending on the age when entering the U.S. and if irregular means of migration were considered, the case is usually that low skilled jobs are the main source of income. I postulate education by men is rarely considered because education rarely nets immediate income and many immigrants need to find jobs that will provide immediate pay in order to establish themselves. Cerrutti and Massey argue that the odds for migration are

lower for wives than for husbands and these odds decline as age and education increases (192). This means that education and age are strong predictors of whether women will migrate. The same trend they argue is the same for men. Kanaiaupuni analyzed uneducated individuals and the figures revealed climbing risks of international migration among educated women and falling risks among educated men (1335). The following graph, found in Shawn Kanaiaupuni's "Reframing the Migration Question" article, depicts the aforementioned trend:

FIGURE 3: Relative Odds of First Migration among Men and Women by Educational Attainment



Note: Reference category, no education

The graph reveals that women who attained more than a primary school but less than a high school degree are 2.7 times as likely to migrate as those with no education. Men's ambitions to emigrate on the other hand, as already mentioned, decline as they obtain more education. I would argue the strong patriarchal norms in Mexico force women to seek better opportunities in the U.S. David McKenzie and Hillel Rapoport in their report entitled, *Migration and Education Inequality in Rural Mexico*, seek to identify women's propensity to further their studies after migration and find that "migration is associated with higher levels of education for girls whose mother have 0-2 years of education" (22). McKenzie and Rapoport find stronger results in females 16 to 18 years old age group in that for this group, migration appears to reduce the child's education. The reason this is so is because McKenzie and Rapoport find a positive correlation between obtaining an education and migration in younger migrants than in older. This is an interesting anomaly due to the fact but may be explained with the schooling system in the U.S. and how at age 21, students cannot attend high school. It may prove overwhelming to adapt to the language and ultimately further their studies.

How migration and the availability of education in the U.S. affects gender roles is what is of concern. What about becoming educated allows for gender roles to change or shift from their norm? It is the movement of Mexican women to the U.S. that could potentially affect their gender roles, if it is the case that migration nets progressive attitudes towards gender relations. Howell finds that women who obtained a post-secondary education were able to contribute economically to the household and this in turn changed ideals regarding sexual mores and of motherhood. Many women questioned

the fairness of a double standard that requires women to remain virgins until marriage, while bachelors are free to engage in sexual relations without damaging their reputation (Howell 117). Another finding was that women were less likely to marry at an early age. A testimony from a parent in support of her daughter's educational endeavors is described by the following:

If you finish [school] on Monday, you can marry on Tuesday. There's no problem. I approve. But don't think that if you say, "I'll marry on Monday and finish on Tuesday," that your father or I will help you. Finish your degree first, and then you can do whatever you want with your life. That's all we ask of you. We don't have to live with him for the rest of our lives [and] it's your decision. But don't make the mistake of marrying before you have a way to support yourself. (Howell 119)

The uncertainty depicted by this scenario allows for understanding regarding the importance of education as a way to support one's self economically. It allows for a change in gender roles in that the woman is forced into marriage. The concerned parent portrays the transformation gender roles are experiencing through the fear of their daughter experiencing a tragic marriage. One professional woman in her twenties observed, "My mother was raised to be a *mujer abnegada* and she stayed with my father [who was physically abusive]" (Howell 100). Experiences such as this encourage women to increase their authority and ultimately shape the role of the woman to fit a more protective and cognizant role. Parrado et al also found the main personal trait that increases women's relationship power is educational attainment; this is because better-educated Mexican women consistently have higher levels of relationship control, control over sexual

negotiation, and emotional consonance than do their less educated counterparts (Migration and Relationship Power 366). They also claim that the effect of education does not vary between migrant and non-migrant women, "making it a central resource for achieving more-egalitarian gender relations across contexts" (Migration and Relationship Power 366).

Employment

The last factor that will be considered is the labor market and how women participate in it. Employment as a variable can be a useful tool to detect how gender relations have been evolving in the household. Scholars have debated whether this is a significant indicator of the change that gender roles go through due to migration flows. Margarita Melville in her article entitled, "Mexican Women Adapt to Migration," discussed how employment affects the psychological stress that Mexican women go through because of the tension that immigration causes. Melville finds that women who assumed active economic roles also partook in new, more progressive, gender roles (230). The transformed roles permitted women to have more freedom and also enhanced their ability to contribute to decision-making. Research by feminist scholars in various racial-ethnic communities suggests that the increase in immigrant women's economic contributions to the family economy accounts for the diminution of male dominance in the family (Kibria 11). Further analysis will be made of migrant and non-migrant women to reach a better understanding of how gender roles are affected.

Migrant women. Migrant women have a different experience than their non-migrant counterparts due to the challenged migration, either legal or illegal, imposes on them. The

journey could vary in the danger the woman encounters to the costs involved with emigrating. Melville's study reflects that 16 of the women who were employed were contributing a more or less equal share to the household income and that all but three of the eleven who were married were still expected by their husbands to perform all of the household duties of a traditional housewife (230). The tension in gender roles is created due to the increased participation of the woman in providing for the family but also because of the need to adapt to a new sociocultural environment (230). The latter is of importance because all migrants are faced with a new world, in a sense, to discover and become accustomed to. A language barrier exists and cripples migrants by challenging their ability to communicate and function in society.

Non-migrant women. This group of women should also be considered because in a sense it is not important to only evaluate the change in gender roles as they occur in the U.S. but also those who are affected by migration flows. Hondagneu-Sotelo, in her study based on 44 adult women and men in 26 families, tries to identify the diminishing hold patriarchal norms had on migrant women. Her study should also be praised for having obtained information of women who were left behind in Mexico but also of the woman who found the means to migrate to the U.S. Interestingly, the women who were left behind by a spouse became independent since they were forced to take the role of "bread winners" in the household (Hondagneu-Sotelo 401). Testimony from Teresa Ibarra, a woman whose husband migrated to California while she remained behind in a small town in Michoacan caring for five children, explained:

When he came here [to the United States], everything changed. It was different. It was me who took the responsibility for putting food on the table, for keeping the children clothed, for tending the animals. I did all of these things alone, and in this way, I discovered my capacities. And you know, these accomplishments gave me satisfaction. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 402)

Teresa Ibarra realizes she had the potential to provide for her children all along and it allowed her to continue persevering. The role of the Mexican woman seems to evolve as the husband immigrates. Michael Whiteford in "Women, Migration and Social Change: A Colombian Case Study," found that the female migrants he studied in Colombia assumed new gender roles in the city as a result of their active economic roles (12). Despite Whiteford's research not concentrating on Mexican women, it still portrays the change in gender norms that occurs to women from south of the border. A trend that is often overlooked is that the women, who are left to provide for their offspring and themselves, find jobs within their community or choose to migrate to more industrialized areas of the country. The maquiladora industry in the states bordering with the U.S. is known for the abundance of its factory jobs. What is overlooked by many who are aware of the maquiladora industry is the effects it has on the citizens of Mexico. Despite providing jobs the corporations provide with low wages and improper working conditions for the workers. It quickly turns into a part of the labor sector known for its flaws and the negative effects it has on the individuals who participate in it.

Conclusions

The aim of this study is to take into consideration the changes the gender roles of Mexican women due to the migration process. The indicators reflected upon were levels of authority, education levels, and employment of women of Mexican descent. I also found it important to delineate between migrant and non-migrant women, as those who decide to stay in Mexico are also affected by the emigration occurring in Mexico. Despite the limited information regarding this group of women, surprisingly, sufficient research allowed for further understanding of the effects migration has on Mexican women. The trek to a different environment exacerbated by the challenges of integration and acculturation for individuals who leave their country are substantial. It is not every day that many people decide to leave their home in search for a better life. And when this journey is made, it is bound to affect the individuals but also those around them.

The level of authority is renegotiated among couples depending on the nature of the migration. It was found that women who became more economically independent, were able to influence decision-making significantly. Mexican women were able to make decisions concerning age at marriage, their desires for children, the costs of children, and the use of contraception. Other findings asserted that higher levels of fertility diminished the control Mexican women over their relationships. The more children decreased the ability of the woman to find employment or a way to contribute to the family income and thus decreased the bargaining power of the woman. For women who stayed in Mexico, the trend seemed to follow that the women assumed the role of the head of the household and this increased independence contributed to the change in gender roles. The example of

Teresa Ibarra highlights the challenges of providing for offspring without the help of the male figure but also how women overcome these obstacles. The literature observed did not consider the rural to urban migration but this is another factor to consider as many leave their trade to find employment in factories, generally found in urban areas.

The level of education was also an indicator considered as affecting gender roles in women. Notions regarding the probability of migration among Mexican women increased if education at least reached the secondary level were found. If the education levels of the mother went beyond the secondary, the probability of immigrating for their offspring decreased (McKenzie and Rapoport 22). Education was reported to being the main personal trait that increases women's relationship power; this is because better-educated Mexican women consistently have higher levels of relationship control, control over sexual negotiation, and emotional consonance than do their less educated counterparts (Migration and Relationship Power 366).

Among the indicators, the most significant variable was the effect employment had on transforming gender roles. The angle by which this indicator was analyzed is important to note. In trying to understand gender role change, both migrant and non-migrant women were considered as the focus of this paper is to understand how the roles change. Employment of migrant and non-migrant women translated into more progressive roles for women. Due to the increased involvement in the household contribution in terms of monetary funds, the woman's input became increasingly considered in the household. In one of the studies, only a small percentage of the women who took on a more contributing role were expected to maintain traditional gender roles (Melville 230). Overall,

employment was a strong indicator of gender role change among Mexican women due to the strong correlation among women who were more authoritative than their non-employed counterparts.

Overall, the three indicators considered can be seen as catalysts for the transformation gender roles have experience and continue to experience.

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