

Institute for  
Latino Studies  
University of  
Notre Dame

Student  
Research  
Series

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Introduction	1
Traditional Roles in Mexico	2
Women's Chang- ing Role in the U.S.	3
Social Networks, Power, & Rela- tionships	4
Sexuality and Power Dynamics	5
Homophobia and Homosexuality	6
Changes in Labor in Mexico and the US	7
Domestic Vio- lence: A Male Perspective	8
A Case Study: Antonio	9
Selected Poetry	10-13
References	14

# Women, Men, and the Changing Role of Gender in Immigration

Volume 3, Issue 3

Fall 2009



Picture: Brianna Muller

## Why is Gender Important?

Gender is a socio-cultural construct of female and male identity that shapes how individuals live and interpret the world around them. Gender is not natural; it is learned in society through direct and indirect means. Although some may think that gender mainly applies to women, gender refers equally to ideas about females and males. Gender thus refers to the social attributes, opportunities, and relationships that are associated with being feminine and masculine. It also determines what behaviors are valued, expected, and allowed of men and women in a given context.

Similarly, gender roles are perceived behavioral norms associated with males and females within a given social group, culture or system. Moreover, the ideas of masculinity and femininity exist only in comparative relation to one another. In other words, femininity does not exist independently of masculinity and vice versa. Gender affects and is affected by social, political, economic, and religious forces. Migration represents a drastic life change and gender roles and relations often shift in

this process. At the same time, gender permeates many of the practices, identities, and institutions involved in the processes of immigration and assimilation.

The goal of this research brief is to gain a better understanding of the gender roles of Mexican immigrants and how they are influenced by the migratory process and life in South Bend and elsewhere in the United States.

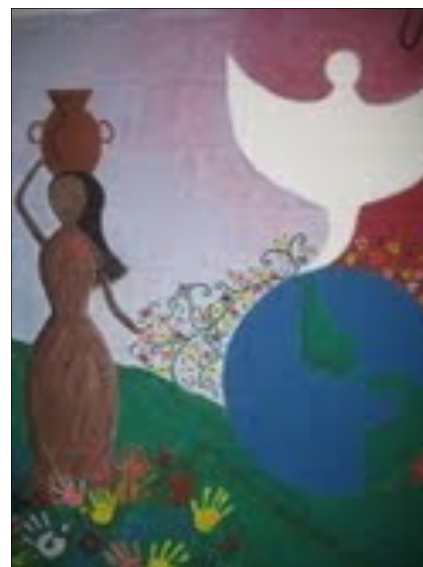
This research addresses what Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003:9), a pioneer in the study of gender and immigration, refers to as "the third stage of immigration research." This brief examines a breadth of issues related to gender including traditional gender roles in Mexico, spatial embodiment of gender roles, social networks, labor markets, and sexuality.

## A South Bend Reality

Over the past few decades, Latino immigrants, primarily of Mexican descent, have been immigrating to the United States at increasing rates in search of economic opportunities that are not readily available in Mexico and Central America. The west side of South Bend has witnessed this rapid influx of Mexican immigrants, causing a shift in the demographic composition of the community. Over a period of ten years, South Bend's Latino population increased from 3% of the total population in 1990 to 8% of the total population in 2000.

Given the rapid growth of the Mexican population in South Bend, it is essential that a more comprehensive understanding of this group be developed. Gender is a useful lens for examination of the Latino population in South Bend.

Picture: Jenna Knapp



# Traditional Roles in Mexico

The meanings of gender are learned and internalized through everyday life. Children come to understand what masculinity and femininity means through seemingly inconsequential practices. The spatial organization of residences is one example of an ordinary practice that deeply affects how gender is learned by young children. Gender roles of men and women are reflected in spatial distinctions of *la calle* (the street) and *la casa* (the home). Men are able to leave the home freely, whether it be for work or leisure; because part of their gender role is to support the family, they are not required to ask for permission to be in the street.

Symbolically, *la calle* represents men's space: it implies freedom for working and even for reprehensible behavior such as drinking and infidelity. A blind eye is turned to these behaviors because men provide the financial support of a household. On the contrary, *la casa* symbolizes a female space. The home tends to be a space of "ordered and managed sexuality as opposed to the sexual danger and ferment of the street" (Hirsch 2003 100). Women are largely expected to be *amas de la casa* (homemakers), ensuring that the home and children are adequately cared for while men work outside of the home. There are not many opportunities for women to work outside of the home, and women can be chastised if seen outside the home ("*en la calle*") without a man.

As a result of these heavily gendered identities, marriages are often based on the concept of *respeto* (respect) and have a hierarchical power structure in which a woman is often relegated to the demands and desires of her husband (Hirsch 2003). Both men and women we interviewed in South Bend who migrated from Mexico attested to this spatial arrangement being the standard. They explained that a woman's primary role in Mexico is to obey her husband and her family while caring for the home and children. This embodiment of *la calle* and *la casa* re-

flects the traditional gender roles that have defined men's and women's identities in the past. These traditional roles were largely based on families marrying families for economic or status reasons, rather than a man and a woman marrying for passionate love.

However, several important processes are shaking up the social and familial structures that define these spatial distinctions. For example, migration has profoundly affected gender roles and identities. Anthropologist Roger Rouse studied a transnational migrant circuit linking Anguilla, Michoacán and California's Silicon Valley. He explains that "it is the circuit as a whole rather than any one locale that

"modernized" to become a different lived reality for men and women alike.

Although much of the traditional gender roles and spatial images remain prevalent in Mexico, immigration has shifted many of these norms over the past few decades. The "modern" influence from immigrants in the United States has motivated individuals in Mexico to change their behavior. For example, many women in Mexico are beginning to work outside of the home for wages, often selling foodstuffs or other items in the informal economy because their women counterparts in the United States are working outside the home. Not only is this becoming acceptable in some places, it is expected

behavior in efforts to become more modern, as Mexicans consider the United States as the standard for modernity. Relatively speaking, this is a newer trend. In the 1970s women's participation in the Mexican labor market increased by 50 percent. Participation accelerated even more in the 1980s during the economic crisis and subsequent structural read-

justment programs (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 32). Therefore, the younger generation of women is working outside of the home much more than older women ever did as this becomes the new standard. Many marriages can now be defined by *confianza* (trust) rather than *respeto*. In these relationships, love and respect are often reciprocated leading to a mutual trust and intimacy of a pair. Much of this *confianza* stems from an increasing amount of people marrying based on love and choosing their own partners (Hirsch 2003).

Overall, migration has affected the traditional gender roles in Mexico, transforming them into what families in Mexico believe is the norm in the United States. Families try to conform to what is modern based on what they gather from their transnational relationships with family and friends in the United States



Picture: Jenna Knapp

constitutes the principal setting in relation to which Aguilillans orchestrate their lives" (Rouse 2002: 162). Thus, transnationalism is a useful framework when trying to understand the changing gender roles and gendered identities both in Mexico and the United States. Modern definitions of gender roles also stem from the global media. The internet and television provide constant images of the "modern" world, influencing the way of life in Mexico.

Additionally, these roles change through time, both generationally speaking and through one's lifetime. Men and women have more authority as they age, as is typical in many societies. Additionally, when men migrate to the United States and leave their wives in Mexico, women gain much more autonomy and power, as they make important familial decisions independently (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). With all of these dynamic factors, gender roles and identities in Mexico have

# Women's Changing Role in the United States

Because many migrants come to the United States for economic reasons, more women are inclined to enter the labor force to increase family income. In doing so, gender roles and power structures often transform in the United States. By entering the workforce, women gain leverage in their families because of their increased economic influence. This is not to say that women do not work outside of the home in Mexico, as that certainly is the case for many women. However, much of the work that women do in the United States generates more income than it would in Mexico, allowing women to be much more financially independent.

Patricia Pessar, an anthropologist who is an expert on Dominican immigration, has concluded, that labor has distinct effects on Dominican women's identities. "Work enhances women's self-esteem as wives and mothers, affords them income to actualize these roles more fully and provides them with a heightened leverage to participate equally with men in household decision-making" (Pessar 1986: 281). Since Mexican women come from a culture that has similar patriarchal norms of machismo, this finding is significant for Mexican women as well; Hindagneu-Sotelo also notes "research conducted in...Mexican...immigrant communities in the U.S. suggests that the increase in immigrant women's economic contribution to the family economy, concomitant with immigrant men's declining economic resources, accounts for the diminution of male dominance in immigrant families" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 101).

While many of the men and women we interviewed acknowledged that women have more power in the United States, many of these power relations hinge upon domestic violence, as they did in Mexico. Many of the women stated that they felt more powerful in the United States because there were laws to protect them against domestic violence, but also stated that abuse and violence were regular occurrences, so that men continued to *mandar la casa* (run the home) because of violence. Therefore, although many women and



Picture: Alicia Quiros

men believe that women have gained power in the United States, there is still the consensus that men use abuse and violence as tools to oppress women. The role of domestic violence is somewhat paradoxical. Although women and men believe that one of the reasons that they have more power is due to the domestic violence laws that protect women, both sexes also assert that domestic violence is a prevalent way through which men continue to *mandar la casa*, illustrating that the situation in the United States is not completely different from that in Mexico.

However, most women that were interviewed felt positively about the shift in gender and power roles that have occurred in the United States, indicating that they preferred their role in the United States. The progress of women's shifting gender roles could also be seen through a generational lens; some individuals mentioned that their mothers received the same treatment in the United States as they did in Mexico—they were abused and were not able to stand up for themselves because they were unable to read, to write, or to drive, limiting their independence.

On the other side of the spec-

trum was Samuel, the eleven year old son of second generation immigrants, who insisted that he would "never ever hit his wife". This range of beliefs about the role and treatment of women illustrates the ideological shifts that take place over time as a result of migration to the United States.

Overall, there are notable differences in the roles of women in Mexico and the United States. As a result of labor opportunities outside of the home and domestic violence laws, women feel more empowered than they did in Mexico. The effects of this empowerment creates a ripple effect, influencing a multitude of social aspects; as Pessar notes, "Despite gender inequities in the labor market and workplace, immigrant women employed in the United States generally gain greater personal autonomy and independence, whereas men lose ground...it also provides them with greater leverage in appeals for male assistance in daily chores...spatial mobility and their access to valuable social and economic resources beyond the domestic sphere also expand" (Pessar 2003: 27).



## Social Networks, Power and Relationships

Social networks are essential for the participation of all people in communities, especially in immigrant communities. Roger Rouse explains how “migration has always has the potential to challenge established spatial images. It highlights the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through collective human agency” (1996:250). These social spaces hold the potential for social networks. The fact that social networks are dynamic is a given in changing social spaces. Social networks however, cannot be discussed without a gendered lens.

When one leaves their entire social network in their home community and begins a new life in a new place, social networks must be re-found and often re-built. Social networks take various forms and serve various functions for both men and women. Jennifer Hirsch, in her ethnography, *A Courtship after Marriage*, describes one of the most obvious and useful roles of social networks. She explains that “For migrants to the United States,” it is comforting to know that they belong to a social network at home, “reminding them that in Mexico they are valued members of a community in spite of the fact that they work in low-paying low-status jobs” here in the United States (2003:75). In South Bend, we see the same emphasis put on social networks back home. These networks back home, as women and men in South Bend have recounted, are based primarily on family and extended family. Additionally, for practicality’s sake, they expand and are more flexible here in the United States.

There is equal value in belonging to a social network in the United States, specifically in South Bend. Many women, upon arrival in South Bend, feel more isolated from the social networks of which they were a part of at home. Trust (*confianza*) is essential to rebuilding social networks in South Bend. One informant, Josselyn, described to us that she finally found power in her relationship with her husband and as a woman in

the United States when she found the social network that supported her (Interview). We found as well that women who claimed they felt more power in their relationships often had *confianza* as opposed to *respeto* (respect), not only with their husband, as Hirsch talks about (2003), but also with a larger social network.

Immigrant men are assumed to be the main participants in transnational social networks. They are presumably the “bridge” between the home community and the new community in the United States. While men certainly do allow for the continuation of transnational social networks, women also play into these networks. They also must participate in social networks in South Bend to build *confianza* with others. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo explains the purpose social networks for men: “reduce migration’s financial and social costs and risks by providing the new migrant with valuable information, cash loans, job contracts, and other resources” (1994:55).

Women in South Bend claim that they are able to transform abusive relationships and gain power as individuals outside of the house through networks. They gain power when they learn how to drive, form relationships with other women, and work outside the home. All three steps to gaining power and dignity as a woman take place when the woman leaves the realm of the domestic, private sphere. When she leaves this realm, she is able to build a social network with those in her community and those in her workplace. One woman, Bertha, currently living in El Paso, neither fully in the United States nor quite detached from Mexico, explained almost longingly of the social network she had in the factories in Juárez. She told of how she missed the days they spent together, in the same unfortunate situation, but with the support of each other

(Interview).

Men in South Bend expressed to us their concerns at first in letting their female partners leave the private sphere. Since men normally are the pioneers of public social networks, it is difficult for them to accept that women too can and should build and maintain them (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:55). Hence, it seems their masculinity is threatened when women begin to form their own social networks. When they begin to be supported by other women, rather than just their fathers or husbands they take on some of the traditional male roles. Josselyn and Antonio expressed to us the threat to the husband’s power caused when Josselyn left the house. He would go to all extremes, even locking her inside the home and beating her daily, to assure that he would not lose power as the one in the dominant position who belonged to a stronger social network (Interviews).

Interestingly, as the wife in this relationship has built a network outside of the home, in her workplace, with other women in her church, her husband has stopped abusing her. He has gained *confianza* in her, and she in him. It seems then, that the construction of social networks outside the home in South Bend, are essential for both men and women. They serve both practical and emotional purposes. In the wider social network, the more *confianza* each has in others in public, the more *confianza* they find in each other in their relationship. Both gain power through the building and joining of social networks in South Bend and transnationally.



[http://lh4.ggpht.com/\\_lergzqkpNmE/SsPxd4jh\\_wl/AAAAAABBTI/7uh3tkl2vrtk/s912/UCSD\\_Legacy%20Mural%20-%20Mario%20Torero.jpg](http://lh4.ggpht.com/_lergzqkpNmE/SsPxd4jh_wl/AAAAAABBTI/7uh3tkl2vrtk/s912/UCSD_Legacy%20Mural%20-%20Mario%20Torero.jpg)

# Sexuality and Power Dynamics

Sexuality plays a major role in the lives of Mexicans both in Mexico, in South Bend and on the journey between the two countries. One respondent, having lived in South Bend for about nine years though he grew up in Mexico, explains the change from his generation to his children's generation regarding sexuality:

"Honestly, its kinda f\*\*ed up. Why? Because they went to a field trip and they show them how to use a condom if they have sex, so to these people showing these guys, that is how you have sex, use a condom. So the girl doesn't get pregnant and the guy doesn't get the girl pregnant" (Interview Antonio).

He continued and explained how sexuality was handled when he was a kid. When asked how parents talked about sex with the kids in Mexico he replied, "You don't you just don't." We saw these sentiments echoed in other interviews with first generation immigrants regarding the sexual education of their children.

Matthew Gutmann discusses sexuality in his ethnography, "The Meanings of Macho." His findings echo our findings in South Bend. He claims that girls and boys in Mexico have very few adults with whom they can talk about their concerns about reproduction and their bodies. Also, these conversations were never a part of the definition of "fathering" or "mothering" a child (1996:114). However, we find that this is changing in South Bend. Gutmann claims this is due to the high numbers of people immigrating to the United States, returning home and creating a transnational community.

It was only after one informant had lived in the United States for a number of years and had gained some power in her relationship with her husband that she said they began to have sex for more than just procreation. She says that most women in her community in Mexico have no idea how sex works when they are first married because no one ever tells them. Most women are scared and avoid it for some time. When couples engage in sexual intercourse, the act is normally finished when the man experiences an orgasm. However, our informant claims, "Normalmente, los hombres no esperan hasta las mujeres terminan, pero en mi caso no, él me espera hasta termino, y despues él termina." (Normally, men do not wait for women to finish, but in my case, he waits until I finish, then after, he finishes) (Interview Josselyn). The transformation in their sexual relations, from fear and objectification of her body, to equality, pleasure, and respect, shows a parallel in the transformation of their power relations and equality as a couple with confianza

(trust) instead of only respeto (respect).

Migration has also greatly affected the reproduction of machismo in South Bend and in Mexico. While machismo is definitely still present in South Bend, it is practiced differently than in Mexico. Machismo is an ideology where men have many partners, have power over women, and dominate the public realm. However, it has faced challenges due to the "strains of migration, falling birthrates, and exposure to alternative cultures on television" (Gutman 1996: 239). These economic and sociocultural changes have led to corresponding shifts in male domination as men's authority has been undermined. We see this shift in men's authority portrayed in South Bend.

Most of the men we interviewed claimed that men and women are equal, and that even if they are not currently equal, they should be. This is a huge shift from the situation that one informant describes about his home in Mexico. He tells us that at home, women only care for the children, cook, and clean. They never leave the home, make decisions or have a voice in public. There is no need for women to work outside of the home, so she should not leave. If she does leave, she should only do so with the permission of her husband or father (Interview Josselyn.)

From our time spent in homes of Mexican immigrants in South Bend and from our interviews of individuals, it is clear that the transformed manifestation of machismo and masculine power, the increased mobility and social relations of women outside of the home and in the workplace, and the emphasis on pleasure and equal enjoyment in sexual relations illustrate change. These factors point to more equal gender relations, power-sharing due to economic necessity, and to the dynamic nature of gender roles in South Bend as well as in home communities in Mexico.

Men especially are still attempting to hold onto what they call the "tradition" of more conservative sexual practices



Picture: Brianna Muller

(of no sexual education or birth control for their children) this seems to be an attempt to hold onto their identity as Mexicans. One man informed us that in Mexico, parents to this day do not talk with their children about sex and girls do not get pregnant, by and large, out of wedlock (Interview Antonio). While our research shows this to be false, his conception of Mexico as "traditional" and of the United States as "modern" and somewhat corrupt, propagates the imaginary divide between socially constructed "tradition" and "modernity."

It is important to note that the changing sexual and gender relations in South Bend due to immigration are dynamic to begin with. As man and woman age, their role in the family changes. Hirsch explains in her ethnography the fact that relations are always dynamic. It is present in the very title of her ethnography, *A Courtship after Marriage*. The courtship, or the process of constantly getting to know the other in the relationship, is a constant in marriage. What Hirsch calls "modern marriages" are seen as "*un noviazgo después de ser casados*" (a courtship after marriage) (1996: 248). The goal of this courtship then, is to constantly get to know and understand one's spouse. The constant courtship presupposes constant change in relations and gender roles. Hence, the change in sexual and power relations from Mexico to the South Bend, from traditional to modern is due not only to migration, but also to the inevitable fact that relationships are constantly changing.

" el hombre tiene  
que valorar a la  
mujer y la mujer al  
hombre. El hombre  
y la mujer mandan  
juntos en la casa.  
Tienen que apolyar  
no al otro, pero lo  
mismo... "  
(Josselyn, Interview)  
(...the man has to  
give value to the  
woman and the  
woman to the man.  
The man and the  
woman control the  
house together.  
They have to  
support each  
other...)

# Homophobia and Homosexuality

Sexuality has bounds, as does gender. Changing gender relations in South Bend and in Mexico also implies that stereotypes of homosexual individuals are changing. While by and large on the West Side of South Bend the stereotypes still hold that men should not be gay or feminine and women should not be lesbian or masculine, we have seen some slight change in the stereotypes at play in this transnational community. Integrated into the definition of *macho* is the fact that a man provides for his family. On the other hand, *mandilón* refers to a man dominated by his woman (Gutmann 1996:221). Obviously, neither of these options for defining a man takes into consideration the man who is in a relationship with another man, leaving no space for the concept of homosexuality within masculinity and promoting a sort of homophobia

The discussions which we have overheard regarding homosexuality by no means talk about this as a legitimate or respectable lifestyle. It seems that attitudes in South Bend are parallel to those discussed by Gutmann. Many believe that "homosexuality is a result of parenting problems" while at the same time, many see an openness to homosexuality as a way to take part in "newer, democratic ideas" (1996: 125). At the same time, because men are expected to fill the role of the *macho* man, we have overheard many cruel and unwelcoming jokes regarding gay men. Most likely, this is due to the fact that while people try to hold onto the "progress" of democratic ideas, they still hold the ideas and stereotypes of the com-



Picture: Jenna Knapp

munity that they are from. In a way, their lack of acceptance for homosexual individuals maintains their ties to Mexico.

In Mexico, a man must prove his masculinity through impregnating women. If he does not, he is not considered a man. Mexican men must "confirm their virility through fathering many children" (Gutmann 1996: 116). Due to this fact, homosexuality demarcates men who do not impregnate a woman, thus by Mexican standards they are not men at all.

Insecurity in one's own gender identity lies at the root of insecurity, which creates homophobia both in South Bend and in Mexico. First and foremost, to eliminate homophobia and create communities where homosexuality is a viable lifestyle, there must be a greater confidence in one's own sexuality and gender based on positive attributes, rather than on what one is not. For example, jokes about certain friends being "gay" and therefore less accepted

could cease to exist if the men and women who made them had a more solid understanding of the dynamic attributes of their own shifting gender identity. If men did not have to define their manhood through fathering children or through power, and if women could have more equal power with their male partners, there would cease to be a need to marginalize someone with a different sexual orientation. Instead all individuals would be seen as having different gender and sexual orientations. Sexuality and gender are dynamic; the understanding and acceptance of this will lead us to less violence, and less oppression of those who choose to live a life of homo, hetero, or bisexuality.



# Changes in Labor in Mexico and the US



Picture: Alicia Quiros

Three Mexican men working in an industrial kitchen in the US

There is a common misconception that Mexican women never work outside of the home until they reach the United States and are thus liberated from the bondage of home life. This generalization is far from the truth. In fact, in the 1970s women's participation in the Mexican labor market increased by 50 percent and accelerated even more in the 1980s during the economic crisis and subsequent structural readjustment programs (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 32).

Women of all educational levels began working in the formal and non-formal sector in increasing numbers, as they began having fewer children and becoming mothers later on in life (Latapí 2001: 4). In fact, with the increase in migration to the United States, woman's employment in Mexico has become a symbol of the ever-elusive "progress" many Mexicans seek on the road to "modernity." This dynamic situation in Mexico begs the question of what "traditional" roles

actually mean for Mexican women.

Interviews with women who immigrated to the United States from rural Central Mexico revealed that in their experience, amidst these changing trends, women in rural areas still did not work in the formal sector. They might do domestic work for relatives in order to feed all of the mouths in a family, but upon marriage they were usually confined to domestic work (Pamela, Interview). In the event that they do get a job, gender relations might begin to shift, as women no longer have to respect, tolerate, or even stay with husbands who spend money on vices and do not treat them with compassion (Wilson 2009: 16). However, having been to the United States, women are less likely to see the meager wages in Mexico as adequate and empowering, as Angelica points out, "I went back to Mexico for a year but it was awful because I was making \$80 at a shoe factory every 15 days and I could make that in three days in the United States" (Interview). Thus, especially after having lived in the US, wages for women in Mexico can seem more demeaning than empowering. In the age of globalization, women have become the

preferred providers of cheap, repetitive, and often poorly paid labor (Fernandez-Kelly 2000: 1109). Rather than providing living wages to Mexican women, these industries only intensify their desire to emigrate.

In the immigrant context of South Bend, women we interviewed spoke positively of their factory jobs. Although they find the work to be repetitive and uninspiring, they claimed that the job gives them greater freedom because they are economically independent from their husbands. However, they lament the fact that as is customary for "protective" Mexican mothers, they cannot be with their children all day. Nonetheless it is important to note that there is no all-encompassing trend to describe the female migrant's transition since there are so many variables in the lives of migrant women. However, based on the interviews conducted for this research, there is considerable evidence that many (though not all) women in the United States and in Mexico have gained a new level of autonomy with the rising trend in immigration.

Picture: Alicia Quiros



# Domestic Violence: A Male Perspective



Picture: Alicia

When asked about their changing gender roles in the US, men surveyed had a variety of responses. The heterogeneity of responses reflects the fact that the extent of this change and the attitudes towards it vary tremendously among Mexican males. In concordance with current social science theorizations, masculinity is multidimensional and historically variable (Hirsch et al. 2009: 28). Thus, views on changing masculinity are undoubtedly variable as well. As Matthew Gutmann points out in his book *The Meanings of Macho*, models of homogeneity among men falsely lead to the notion that there is a unitary man's point of view, rather male views change and deviate in a "processual flux" and cannot be molded into a particular configuration (1996:20). The following scenarios from our interviews demonstrate this diversity.

When asked how their gender roles had changed in the United States, three male informants who were originally married in Mexico remarked that they can no longer beat their wives in the United States as they did in Mexico for fear of police intervention. As women's agency expands in the United States, men often have even more incentive to abuse them in order to reassert their power in the home. However, fear of legal repercussions forces some immigrant men to shed their "macho" role of violently demonstrating discontent in the home.

According to Victor, in Mexico the police would come to the door and ask what the problem was and upon finding out that the women was disturbing the man they might tell the man to "give her another one" in order to shut her up (Interview). While his father chimed in stating that this is changing under Mexico's new president, they both agreed that men had less freedom to physically control their wives in the United States than they did in Mexico (Miguel, Interview).

Despite domestic violence laws in the United States, this transformation is certainly not one that always occurs. Some men resist this shift in power and continue beating their wives, often with the knowledge that their wives cannot go to the police because they are undocumented and would jeopardize their entire family's safety in doing so (Pamela, Interview). Additionally, the loss of social networks and the new spatial living situations sometimes make abuse more feasible in the United States, whereas in Mexico families were more likely to live closer together and to utilize social net-

works to keep abuse in check. We found that persistence in physical abuse is more common among older men, who were first married in Mexico, although it often subsides as women age and can no longer risk the family's honor by having illegitimate children.

It is important to note that women can also contribute to gender hierarchies. According to Josselyn, who suffered abuse at the hands of her husband, some of her friends encouraged her to leave him, while others told her not to overstep her bounds as a woman and to stay with him even though he abused her (Interview). Women as well as men can scold other women for daring to challenge gender stereotypes. In some cases, women may even allow their husbands to beat them in exchange for their independence outside of the home (Hondagneu-Sotelo).



Picture: Alicia Quiros

Husband and father cooks Thanksgiving dinner for his family in South Bend



# A Case Study:

One man's story illustrates the way in which a man's views on power relations in the home can transform dramatically throughout the course of one's lifetime. Although not all Mexican, immigrant men experience this transformation; it is a powerful testament to the possibility for change in gender relations and beliefs that can occur in immigration across space and time.

Antonio is a second-generation immigrant, but he grew up with his father's example of how to exert power in the home. Looking back on the power dynamics at play in his upbringing, he recalls:

"Mom and dad got here [United States] and it was the same s\*\*\* for my mom. Why? Because she didn't know how to drive, read, write, so to her it was the same s\*\*\*. It was just working and that was it. My dad beat her a\*\* and that's it. She couldn't do s\*\*\*. Why? Because she didn't have the knowledge of reading or writing or knowing people that told her she could survive on her own. So for a lot of women it's the same thing."

Growing up, Antonio's concept of what it meant to be a man was predicated on the fact that he had to use physical force to control his wife and children in order to exert his "manliness." Additionally, women were to remain isolated in the house so as not to learn to resist the patriarchy inherent in the household. Antonio felt constant pressure to be like his father and followed in his footsteps to the point that he would not allow his own wife to venture outside of the house. When asked if this is the prevailing view of men in Mexico, he responded:

"Yeah, in Mexico it's like I'm the man and the power and that's it ya know. I'm gonna do this and that but you don't have no opinion. You're just right here at home so you can cook take care of the kids and that's it. Here it's totally different. Now I think different that we're equal me and her."

His description of the "macho" mentality of some Mexican men fits a common local theory of gender and power in which men portrayed macho behavior as a caricature of masculinity, as men who take and abuse power without earning it by fulfilling their responsibilities (Hirsch 2003: 139). His shift away from this macho mentality came with the strong influence of the Catholic Church. Antonio claims that the Church taught him a different meaning of being a man. After wielding power and dominance over his wife for 11 years, he now claims that men and women are equal, and even attests to the strength and resilience of women who have had to work harder than men for years amidst abuse and with little recognition.

"Honestly now the way I think, the woman is always stronger than the men. Over there and right here. Cause honestly I saw my mom and I see my wife too but sometimes we say we're the man but honestly the woman is more man than the man. Because see like my mom she used to go to work come home and take care of us, cook, clean the house and everything. My dad, the only thing that he did is work and that was it. He just waited till the food was ready. My wife did the same s\*\*\*. But now for example she goes to work. I clean the whole house, I cook for her, I wash the dishes, the clothes and everything. I take care of the kids. And it doesn't take away from me being a man."

Although Antonio has made a rather remarkable transition, he proceeded to explain to us that he is the anomaly, rather than the norm, and that he receives quite a bit of criticism from his male peers for his change in behavior and mentality. The following poem describes the changing landscape of gender and family across borders from the vantage point of one man's life story.



Picture: Alicia Quiros

Antonio's family in their home in South Bend

The following poem describes the changing landscape of gender and family across borders from the vantage point of one man's life story.

### **Uprooted**

Faded Polish signs  
make way for the new graffiti of our time  
as we silently scream to make our mark.  
They've moved on and blended in but how can we when our skin's so dark?  
Do they study us now?  
Behind university walls and laptop screens  
to see what will become of our American dreams?  
But we cannot assimilate if they all continue to perpetuate hate.

We live in enclaves  
that feel more like caves  
Yet if you approach the light doorway to the outside  
we'll drag you back in for your sin of pride.  
The Polish must have forgotten their land  
as soon as they reached American sand.  
Yet Mexico remains our home  
Mi tierra, mi vida, mi motherland.  
Now it might seem I've got my life on track  
but first—let's take a few steps back.

My eyes flicker as the hospital lights swirl  
and I can't understand this two-tongued world.  
Mamá whispers to me that I won't have to fear  
'cause she's sacrificed to give birth to me here.  
She says I'm not like my father—I'll make it out.  
"That's right, I'm headed back to my land," he angrily shouts.  
I open my eyes in time to see  
she's signing the papers that will soon define me.  
She can't read them nor make her tongue trace the harsh sounds  
of a language and land that remain out of bounds.

She puts me in school where I learn to read  
but I can't stay there when I see the need  
to fight for my people when we're being attacked  
by those self righteous thieves whose skin is dark black.  
Mama prays to la virgin that she won't lose me to the streets  
yet she's got five others to feed and I don't hardly eat.  
I don't fear the police 'cause I've found a new family where I'm supported  
they can lock me up but I can't get deported.  
Yet I've crossed the border on my own  
to visit my dad and my backwards home.

I turned seventeen and now I'm a grown man  
Can't you tell from these tattoos on my hand?  
Still I'm not prepared when my dad calls to say  
that my girl in Mexico's got a baby on the way.  
I've got enough problems as it is in this life  
and now I'm to care for an illegal wife?  
She's eight months pregnant with a son of mine  
who *has* to be born on this side of the line.  
She says her goodbyes and follows my order  
to take nearly nothing across the border.  
We walk for days through blistering heat  
yet she holds us back with her swollen feet.  
I'm crouching and hiding in the country of my birth  
'cause my skin not my papers define my worth.



Picture: Brianna Muller

We're finally home and the baby's arrived  
 We'll call him Angel for his will to survive.  
 I try to support them with my low-wage job  
 that the blacks say I've stolen cause they'd rather rob  
 our dignity and voices in the public sphere  
 in order to treat us as they've been treated for years.  
 They've found a brown people that they can abuse  
 but when our gang fights back they know they'll lose.  
 They blame us for their plight and just can't see  
 the faceless, racist bureaucrats so they take it out on me.

I've now got four kids and one on the side  
 and I leave them with bruises they can't easily hide.  
 I've got to get out of this place and this war.  
 Is this really what mamá had me here for?  
 I borrow from my family and we head to South Bend  
 though I hate always being indebted to them.  
 My brother gets me a factory job to cut iron sheets  
 but I just can't shake the call of the streets.  
 Spinning out of control, my life's twisted with lies  
 and I use countless women for what's between their thighs.

They all bring me to church but I run every time  
 'cause I'm used to this life full of violence and crime.

A few retreats in, I'm finally sold,  
 Yet to make this shift I'll have to be bold.  
 They say I've sold out—that I'm less of a man  
 'cause my wife no longer gets the backhand.  
 She's works at Burger King where  
 she's abused by arbitrary rules  
 yet she can't speak English to talk back to those fools.  
 'Cause no whites mix with the Latino crowd here  
 Except two young girls whose motives are unclear.

My family's moved here yet they don't understand  
 How that guy up in Church is me, the same man.  
 And now I'm the one giving out all the loans  
 when landlords come to seize their homes.  
 'Cause my papers allow me to collect welfare  
 while I landscape on the side, to earn enough to share.

Yet this land of opportunity isn't for me  
 And when my kids grow I won't have to be  
 a slave to my watch and to rent payment deadlines  
 for I'll be back in Mexico, sweet patria of mine.



This final set of poems describes a relationship that started out in Mexico as an abusive one but grew into a relationship of *confianza* (trust) over the years in the United States. “Fracture” describes the situation from the mother’s perspective, “Secret” describes the father’s perspective, and “Known” describes the new relationship they grow into. The poems capture the personal, ambivalent, and contradictory feelings of the individuals and the broader cultural and structural forces that inform and limit these feelings and actors.

### “Fracture”

Sounds of distant sirens  
send shivers down her spine straight  
to her child bearing hips  
that bore four tiny lives  
into chaos.

Scattered shadows sink  
to reveal the dried blood of yesterday  
and each not-so tiny life  
casts down its weathered gaze  
and attempts to ignore  
the splintered frame that  
booze had used to crack her skull  
with their father’s hands.

Mrs. Miller’s perfect chalky cursive  
spells domestic abuse yet the  
now.

frameless.

blood-stained horseback campesino’s  
applause  
rings across  
patchwork fields of maíz under  
miles of barbed wire towards  
the idealized US city over  
gender equality campaigns  
over Her.

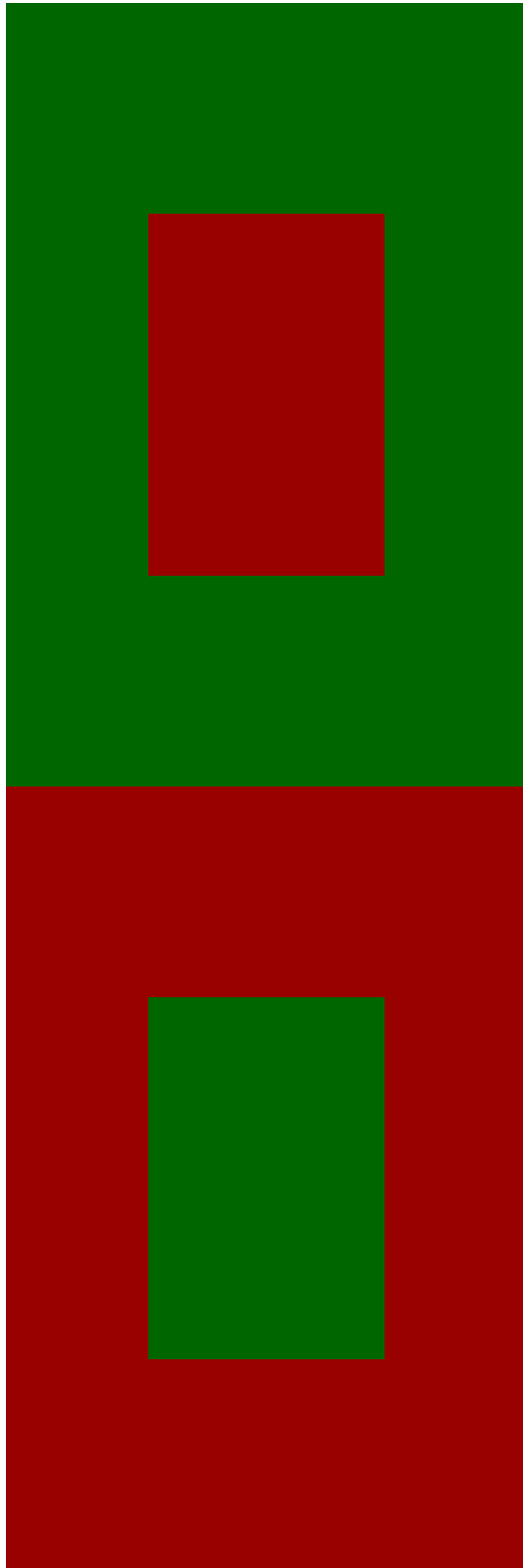
### “Secret”

Police hardly help  
weathered brown skin  
whose tethered trembling  
tames unspoken truths.  
She’s too illegal to break  
her silence  
so he breaks her.

Each backfiring blow  
screams half-way  
thoughts hiding  
in opaque spaces  
where his loneliness  
desires *confianza*.

But prideful roots  
centuries deep keep  
red white and green curtains  
from swaying.  
Their tangled tension  
locks the shrill  
yet silent show  
so she’ll never know  
he hates this freedom.





### ***Known***

Sunlight spots  
two gray-haired figures  
sitting together to rhythmically tie  
miniscule print of a language  
they've yet to learn.

Too tired  
minds drift  
to misbehaved grandkids  
disturbing church-goers  
Upcoming wedding plans  
Lucia's first steps  
Isaac's piñata perched  
for his fourth birthday  
Paula's ever-shorter skirts  
showing slender sexiness  
Sabrina's sex education  
says to wear condoms  
not just to be chaste  
Confirmation will  
change that  
Did they  
order her  
dress?

And while thoughts flurry and fade  
they sit together rhythmically tying  
miniscule print of a language  
they've yet to learn  
and even sunlight senses  
the welcome warmth of  
lifted curtains  
and roots transformed into  
companionship  
where exclusionary unknown words  
slip away when they're tied  
side by side by somebody  
known.

## References

- Angelica. Personal Interview. 29 November 2009.
- Antonio. Personal Interview. 17 November 2009.
- Bertha. Personal Interview. 18 October 2009.
- Fernandez-Kelly, Patricia. "Reading the Signs: The Economics of Gender Twenty-Five Years Later." *Signs*. The University of Chicago. 2000.
- Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1990.
- Gutmann, Matthew. *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*. University of California Press. 1996.
- Hirsch, Jennifer. *A Courtship Before Marriage*. University of California Press. Los Angeles, California: 2003.
- Hirsch, Jennifer et al. "They 'Miss More than Anything Their Normal Life Back Home': Masculinity and Extramarital Sex Among Mexican Migrants in Atlanta." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. Volume 41, Number 1. March 2009.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*. University of California Press. 1994.
- , *Gender and U.S. Immigration Contemporary Trends*. University of California Press. 2003.
- Josselyn. Personal Interview. 18 November 2009.
- Latapí, Agustín. "Employment Trends in Mexico: Reversing a 15-Year Loss?" *UC Davis Research Volume 7 Number 4*. February 2001.
- Miguel. Personal Interview. 20 November 2009.
- Oscar. Personal Interview. 29 November 2009.
- Pamela. Personal Interview. 29 November 2009.
- Paredes, Américo. 1971. "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo." Marcy Steen, trans. *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 8 (1):17-37.
- Pessar, Patricia R. "Engendering Migration Studies: The Case of New Immigrants in the United States." *Gender and U.S. Immigration Contemporary Trends*. New York: University of California, 2003. 20-42.
- , 1986. "The Role of Gender in Dominican Settlement in the United States." Pp. 273-94 in June Nash and Helen Safa, editors, *Women and Change in Latin America*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey.
- Rouse, Roger. "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism." *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Wilmington, Delaware, Scholarly Resources. 1996. 247-263.
- Victor. Personal Interview. 29 November 2009.

### Authors

Jenna Knapp  
Brianna Muller  
Alicia Quiros



## Institute for Latino Studies

Special thanks to all of the people who so graciously shared their stories with us.

Professor Karen Richman's

Mexican Immigration: A South Bend Case Study ILS45103 Fall 2009

230 McKenna Hall  
Notre Dame, IN 46556  
574.631.4440  
latinostudies.nd.edu



