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Increased Deportations Means Less Remittances for Central Americans

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The US financial crisis has meant fewer job opportunities for migrants from Central American countries. However, the latest figures show a slight increase in remittances after a severe slump in 2009.

Jesús Pérez García, a 45-year-old farm laborer from the village of San Francisco Nebaj in the highland department of Quiché, Guatemala, left his wife and four children in March 2010 to embark on a hazardous journey to the US.

Pérez lived in West Burlington, Iowa, where he worked as a cleaner for US$7.25 an hour until he was deported in September 2009.

"I have to work in the fields again as I’m faced with the same needs as before," Pérez says. While he lived in the US, he sent his wife 1,000 quetzales (Q1,000, US$123.50) a month, which she used to pay for their daughter’s education. The couple had also started to build a new home.

Pérez’s brother-in-law José María García emigrated to the US six years ago and lives with his eldest son in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he works as a waiter. With raids on the increase and hefty fines for employers who use illegal immigrant labor, his boss has asked him not to show up to work for some time.

García now spends his days locked in the apartment that he shares with four other Guatemalan immigrants, in constant fear of being discovered and deported. "He hasn’t worked for months and has stopped sending remittances. He can’t even afford his room," says his wife Cecilia.

With the Q1,000 a month that García sent her, she used to pay for her 20-year-old son’s mechanics course in Guatemala City. Now, she will be forced to take out a loan to meet the expense.

Sergio Morales, of the Coalición Nacional de Inmigrantes Guatemaltecos (CONGUATE), explains that unemployment among the Central American community in the US has increased as the construction industry, agriculture, and the service sector, which absorb a considerable percentage of immigrant labor, have been hit hard by the US financial crisis. To make matters worse, deportations increased by 74% in 2009.

A ray of hope

Guatemala's central bank (Banco de Guatemala, Banguat) says remittances dropped by 7.8% last year, raising the specter of hunger in many rural communities as the survival of 30.4% of the country’s households depends on remittances (NotiCen, Jan. 8, 2009). However, the latest Banguat figures show that, with the administration of President Barack Obama investing heavily in economic stimulus measures, remittances have increased by 2.5% during the first half of 2010.

Other isthmus countries have reported a similar recovery: in Honduras, remittances increased by 0.3%, 2.5% in El Salvador, and 2.9% in Nicaragua, as opposed to other Latin American countries such
as Mexico and Colombia, where the downward trend has continued, with remittances decreasing by 4.6% and 12.8%, respectively.

Wilson Romero, of Guatemala’s Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (IDIES), says that remittances have picked up as a result of the US economy’s modest recovery and that this will reactivate consumption in Central American households.

However, economist Rubén Darío Narciso, of the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES), warns that unemployment in the US remains high and that it is too early to assume that the crisis is over. "It is important to remember that the construction industry, which employs a high number of Central Americans, still hasn’t recovered," he adds.

**Female migration and "social remittances"**

During a recent seminar organized by the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), Ana Silvia Monzón, an expert on gender and migration, said that recent studies have revealed differences in the remittances sent by male and female migrants.

"Women send less money home but are more constant. Women specialize in 'social remittances'—remittances sent on birthdays, following the birth of a child, or other special occasions—which are important because they maintain emotional ties and the cohesion of the family," she explained.

Monzón said that, until recently, most studies on migration assumed that women migrated less than men and that their only motivation to leave the country was to be reunited with family members already living in the US.

However, a new series of gender-focused studies have shown that "currently the main reason that women decide to emigrate is that they are gaining more access to education but not to employment." An increasing number of female migrants are single mothers.

Gabriela Roldán, 28, from the municipality of San Antonio La Paz, in the department of El Progreso, 36 km west of Guatemala City, says that her eldest sister was forced to emigrate five years ago, leaving behind her husband and three children, so that she could send remittances home and help support the family.

"The most you can earn in this town is Q300 (US$37) a week," says Roldán. The only sources of employment in San Antonio La Paz are a chicken-processing factory, farm labor, or, in the case of women, commuting daily to Guatemala City to work as housemaids.

But Monzón warns that the opportunities sought abroad often fail to materialize. "Many women find jobs that are as precarious as the ones they had back home because they end up trapped in domestic work.

Others find jobs in agriculture. Only in a few exceptional cases have women found spaces for political participation, such as Norma Torres or Julia Gabriel, who won the Kennedy Human Rights Award for her struggle to defend the rights of agricultural workers in Florida. A handful of women have also been able to set up small businesses," says Monzón.

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