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Increasing Number of Rural Women Migrating to U.S.

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Rural women are comprising a rapidly increasing number of the undocumented Mexicans emigrating to the US in search of employment. In a report released in late February, the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC) said women now comprise 20 of every 100 undocumented Mexicans crossing the border into the US, compared with a ratio of five to 100 during the 1980s. The CNC says that about 200,000 rural women have emigrated to the US since the early 1990s.

CNC director Luis Antonio Ramirez Pineda, who is also a member of the Chamber of Deputies, said the rapid expansion of poverty in Mexico has forced an increasing number of women in rural areas to abandon their traditional role as homemakers and enter the work force. The Fox government claims to have reduced poverty significantly, but many critics say the administration has used bogus calculations to measure progress in this area (see SourceMex, 2003-06-05).

Furthermore, the critics note that the lives of Mexicans are affected by the rapid rise in unemployment (see SourceMex, 2004-01-28). The CNC's report is corroborated by the Instituto Nacional de Mujeres (INMUJERES), which said the migration of women to the US is part of a pattern of exodus by rural residents from their communities to seek employment. A large percentage of women who leave their homes in rural communities end up seeking employment in Mexican cities, but many others travel to the US in search of jobs. "Women account for US$3 billion of the remittances sent by expatriates to Mexico," said Ramirez Pineda, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

In January-November 2003, Mexican expatriates sent about US$12.3 billion in remittances back to Mexico (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14). The percentage of women entering the work force has grown at a much faster rate than that of men during the past two decades. Government statistics show that the number of women among the economically active population (EAP) has risen by 261% in the past 20 years, compared with a 104% increase for men during the same period. INMUJERES noted that, in some instances, women have taken on some jobs in Mexico that would have been filled by men, including employment as migrant agricultural workers in their home state or other states.

Yet, employers in Mexico continue to pay women a much lower salary than they pay men, as shown in statistics from the Encuesta Nacional de Empleo. The survey said more than half the women employed in the agriculture sector roughly 1 million women earn less than the equivalent of one minimum wage. A large number of the women do not receive any pay whatsoever.

INMUJERES director Patricia Espinosa said job search has become the primary reason for Mexican women to enter the US, since they can earn more money in the US than they can at home. "It used to be that women traveled with their husbands as the 'wife of the emigrant,' Espinosa told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "Now we should simply call them women emigrants."
Espinosa said INMUJERES has launched a program targeted especially at women emigrants. Among other things, the program aims to educate women emigrants about their rights, both in the US and in Mexico. To help in this effort, INMUJERES has placed representatives at many of the stations set up by the government to aid emigrants in cities along the US-Mexico border, said Espinosa.

**Children also among immigrants**

The Mexican government and immigrant-rights advocates are also beginning to note an increasing number of children and youth among those crossing into the US. One report from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said more than 17,500 children who had entered the US illegally were repatriated to Mexico in the 18-month period between January 2002 and June 2003. In most instances, the children have accompanied their parents or a relative across the border, but in some cases they crossed the border on their own.

Another trend, according to a joint US-Mexico study, is for immigrant smugglers to offer to smuggle in the children of undocumented workers already working in the US. The study produced by the Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM), the US State Department, and consular personnel from both nations said one operation known as Gringo Coyote Company has targeted smuggling children as one of its many ventures. Federal Deputy Pascual Sigala Paez, who has reviewed the report, said the company's operations were uncovered during a sting operation along the Tijuana-San Diego corridor. "These traffickers were arrested, in the majority of the cases, when they were transporting Mexican children," said Sigala, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

The Gringo Coyote Company, however, has created an operation that goes beyond the transport of children, earning US$8 billion annually by smuggling not only Mexican nationals but also citizens of Central and South American countries. The operation, operated by US and Mexican citizens, employs Mexican and Central American nationals to move migrants from the interior to the border, where US citizens transport the migrants into the US, the study said.

The binational report said that the Gringo Coyote Company has been able to operate with ease because of support from corrupt officials on both sides of the border who allowed smugglers easier transit in exchange for bribes. One-third of the company's earnings are used to pay off officials. A study produced by experts from the Colegio de Mexico, the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, and the Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO) said the number of Mexicans who have crossed into the US without documents has now reached a record 390,000 annually. The numbers have increased despite the tighter security measures imposed by the US government after the attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001.

The tighter security measures have led to the creation of more sophisticated smuggling operations like Gringo Coyote Company, said the binational report. A significant percentage of the emigrants are former residents of rural areas, who once made a living from agriculture. Most Mexican producers have been unable to get prices for corn, coffee, and other basic commodities that provide them with a living. "The more we talk to migrants, the more we hear the story that they simply cannot survive on cash crops any longer, that the only crops they do grow are for their own
consumption,” said Christian Ramirez, an employee of an organization that assists undocumented immigrants in Southern California.

**Repatriation remains controversial**

The increase in the influx of undocumented workers has created tensions with US immigration authorities, who have boosted repatriation efforts. US immigration authorities repatriated almost 600,000 Mexicans in each of the last two years. An estimated 8 to 10 million undocumented Mexicans live in the US.

One pilot program implemented briefly by US authorities last year sought to return Mexicans back to their country at locations far from where they originally crossed. The plan was discontinued after vigorous protests from the Fox administration, which accused the US government of violating the rights of Mexican immigrants (see SourceMex, 2003-10-08). US and Mexican officials, however, revisited the repatriation proposal and came to a partial agreement.

At a meeting in late February, US Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and Mexican Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda signed an agreement to increase cooperation on security measures along the US-Mexico border. The plan includes a controversial proposal for the US to repatriate undocumented workers to their communities of origin, instead of just sending them to Mexican cities along the border with the US. Unlike last year's US pilot program on repatriation, this year's agreement was developed with the consent of both the US and Mexican governments, said Mexican officials.

Still, there was some confusion about whether US and Mexican officials had agreed to make repatriation to the immigrant's home town compulsory or voluntary. At the end of the talks, Creel insisted that undocumented workers would not be forced to return home but given the option to be transported to a border city. "Our Constitution guarantees free movement inside our territory and of course we are going to comply strictly and exactly with the Constitution," Creel told reporters.

The dire economic conditions in Mexico mean that deportees who are sent back to their hometowns will probably seek to return to the US. "Migrants would have to scrape up the money to head north, but that won't stop them from trying again," said Omeheira Lopez, director of the Tamaulipas-based Centro de Estudios Fronterizos y de Promocion de los Derechos Humanos. Ridge promoted the repatriation program as an effort to reduce migrant deaths and undermine smuggling operations. "Neither side wants to see another citizen, a friend, or a neighbor lose their life," Ridge said during a trip to Mexico. A total of 408 deaths of undocumented immigrants were reported in 2003, primarily in the arid deserts of Arizona and Southern California. This is an increase from 371 deaths reported in 2002.

Mexican authorities have attempted to assist would-be emigrants by forming Grupo Beta units in major communities along the border with the US (see SourceMex, 1999-02-03 and 2001-06-20). In early February, the INM said the number of Grupo Beta agents would be increased this year with the creation of new stations in the communities of Sonoyta and San Luis Rio Colorado, both in Sonora state and located near the highest-risk regions of the Arizona desert. Sonoyta is across from Lukeville, Arizona, and San Luis Rio Colorado is a few miles from Yuma, Arizona.
Fox, Bush promote guest-worker proposal

Mexican officials say deaths would be reduced dramatically if the US agreed to negotiate a full immigration agreement with Mexico. US President George W. Bush's administration has deferred discussions on a full accord but has proposed a plan allowing immigrants in the US to apply for legal status for six years provided they are employed (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14). The guest-worker proposal would benefit the US service and agriculture industries, which rely on cheap labor to prosper.

Fox has embraced the proposal and was planning to pursue the plan during a meeting with the US president at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, on March 5-6. Critics in the US and Mexico have described Bush's proposal as insufficient, but many ultraconservatives are angry that the issue has even been put on the table.

One California Senate candidate, Howard Kaloogian, has proposed a controversial plan to deter illegal immigration by preventing undocumented workers from sending remittances back to Mexico. Kaloogian's plan would require anyone sending funds to another country to show a valid identification, such as a Social Security number and a driver's license. "Enough is enough, already," said Kaloogian. "Let's make it so there are no incentives to people who come here illegally." This proposal, while unlikely to become law, would certainly hurt the Mexican economy if it were to prosper. The US$13.3 billion that expatriates sent to Mexico in 2003 surpassed the amount of money entering Mexico via direct foreign investment.

Conversely, their strong economic power has made Mexican emigrants a potentially significant political force in Mexico. By some estimates, about 20 million Mexicans residing in the US could become eligible to vote in Mexico's elections once Congress decides on the rules. Expatriates gained the right to vote in 1996, but lawmakers have yet to determine a format for how this is to take place. Since that time, many Mexicans have traveled to the US-Mexico border to cast their ballots.

The elections watchdog Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), in consultation with the Congress and the Fox administration, has drafted a preliminary proposal to incorporate expatriates into the electoral system by the 2006 election. Under the plan, which would use the Internet, expatriates would be required to have a voter identification card and only be allowed to vote for president. Other related measures are under consideration, such as a proposal to prohibit political parties from using the US media to promote their candidates, said deputy interior secretary Francisco Paoli Bolio. (Sources: Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/22/04; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 01/23/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/13/04, 01/30/04, 02/16/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/16/04, 02/05/04, 02/16/04; Los Angeles Times, 01/06/03, 01/23/04, 01/30/04, 02/20/04; Copley News Service, The Dallas Morning News, 02/21/04; El Sol de Mexico, 02/23/04; El Universal, 01/26/04, 02/16/04, 02/24/04; Reuters, 02/22/04, 02/27/04; The Washington Post, 02/28/04; Notimex, 02/08/04, 02/16/04, 02/29/04; La Jornada, 12/08/03, 02/05/04, 02/24/04, 03/01/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/20/04, 02/04/04, 03/01/04; Unomasuno, 02/17/04, 03/01/04; Associated Press, 01/20/04, 02/20/04, 02/21/04, 03/02/04)