Fall 10-2018

Reducing Vulnerabilities Among Female Migrants in the United States and Spain

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Published In

Newcomb, Rachel and Sarajane Renfroe. 2018. "Reducing Vulnerabilities among Female Migrants in the United States and Spain." In Porous Borders, Invisible Boundaries? Ethnographic Perspectives on the Vicissitudes of Contemporary Migration, eds. Jayne Howell, Deborah R. Altamirano, Faedah M. Totah, and Fethi Keles. Society for Urban, National, and Transnational Anthropology and the Committee on Refugees and Immigrants.

REDUCING VULNERABILITIES AMONG FEMALE MIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND SPAIN

Rachel Newcomb and Sarajane Renfroe

Migrants who establish connections in the host culture, particularly through nonprofit organizations, are more likely to integrate successfully into host societies (Martinez Garcia and Jariego 2002). Yet, anthropologist Maria Olivia Salcido and sociologist Cecilia Menjívar have noted, "gender hierarchies are embedded in the formulation, interpretation, and implementation of immigration laws, as experienced by immigrants" (2013:336). Our research, which compares two field sites in Apopka, Florida and Barcelona, Catalonia, demonstrates that despite the presence of vibrant organizations in both places, legal barriers in the U.S. hamper social integration by preventing women from accessing basic services necessary for survival. The criminalization of migration in the U.S. forces Apopka migrants into what Giorgio Agamben has called "bare life," living in a political system that both criminalizes their presence and excludes them from the benefits offered to citizens (Agamben 1998). In Barcelona, however, political autonomy within the Catalonian region has motivated local governments to offer greater support to migrants than is true for Spain more generally. While migration produces gendered vulnerabilities exacerbated in situations where women lack support networks, ethnographies of local migrant women in both places reveal these vulnerabilities can be reduced by cooperation between non-profits and local governments.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS: BARCELONA AND APOPKA

We chose to compare Moroccan migrant women's experiences in Catalonia to Latina migrant experiences in Florida because both regions share similarities: geographic proximity to sending countries, significant increases in migration over the past two decades, and linguistic challenges for migrants.

In the 1940s after the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona received waves of economic migrants from other regions of Spain, but since the 1990s, migration flows have been external. According to Ricard Zaptata-Barrero (2014, 67), the migrant population of Barcelona has exploded from 4.9% in 2001 to 17.6% by 2010. Regional policies emphasizing "a culture of diversity" facilitate the ability for migrants to integrate. While the central government manages immigration flows, local government policies in Catalonia, such as the 2009 Reception Bill of Immigrants, assert that Catalonia has the right to issue work permits and assist with education, healthcare and housing (Zapata-Barrero 2012: 231). Undocumented migrants can obtain legal residency after three years of living in Catalonia if they have a work contract. Advocates for Catalonian independence promote immigration as a way to gain support for their cause through integrating non-Spanish-speaking migrants into Catalan culture.

Apopka, located in an agricultural region twelve miles north of Orlando, Florida, has a population of 51,564, of which 26% are Hispanic migrants (U.S. Census). Until the 1970s, agricultural migration was internal, but in the past few decades, most farm laborers have come from Mexico and Central America. Although many farms in the area have closed since

the 1990s due to agricultural pollution, migrants find economic opportunities in greenhouses, lawn care, construction, and the service sectors. But in contrast to Barcelona, in Apopka there are few ways for undocumented migrants to access social services, save through nonprofits. The local police are also generally perceived to be hostile, inclined to seek out migrants for deportation.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND NONPROFITS

From May to September 2017, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews in Apopka and twelve in Spain with women migrants, nonprofit workers, and volunteers. Interviews lasted from thirty to ninety minutes, covering topics including the interviewee's migration story, education, family and work history, ability to access basic services, and degree of comfort in the host society, with space for interviewees to share the challenges of migration. In Spain the women had arrived on average ten to fifteen years earlier and were in their mid-twenties to early forties. In Florida our interviewees ranged in age from mid-twenties to early forties and had been in the U.S. from four to eighteen years, with an average of ten years in country. In Barcelona, nonprofits assisting our research were Bayt al-Thaqafa and Fundación Ibn Battuta. In Apopka we worked with HOPE CommUnity Center and the Farmworker Association of Florida. We also attended cultural events and volunteered when possible.

In both places, nonprofits offered similar programs, such as language classes, legal clinics, and empowerment workshops. The nonprofits in Barcelona had more opportunities to collaborate with local government, and during our research a large interfaith Ramadan dinner was held in central Barcelona, attended by local city officials, nonprofit and interfaith leaders. By contrast, we volunteered at a Mother's Day celebration at the Farmworker Association of Florida that was exclusively attended by local migrant families and nonprofit workers. As Ricard Zapata-Barrero has argued, in Barcelona an emphasis on public, official displays of religious diversity is part of a comprehensive project to integrate migrants, while in Apopka no such attempts exist (69).

This sense that government and non-profits provided safety nets and welcomed migrants was echoed in multiple interviews with Moroccan women migrants in Barcelona. Migrant women in Apopka more frequently expressed fear of detention and deportation, of local law enforcement, and their inability to access medical services. Moroccan women, by contrast, voiced concerns of economic insecurity and societal racism while expressing confidence in their freedom of movement and access to medical care. Because of their undocumented status, migrant women in Apopka could only help out as volunteers. In Barcelona, Moroccan migrant women were involved at a much higher level in the nonprofits, as lawyers, psychologists, and directors.

FATIMA AND CELIA: TWO STORIES

We have chosen two migrant women's stories from our interviews to represent the differences in women's vulnerabilities that we witnessed. In Barcelona, the availability of services facilitating linguistic, social, and economic integration meant that migrants could legally earn an income and focus on integration without constantly fearing deportation and separation. In Apopka, the absence of laws supporting undocumented migrants meant that work, education, and mental and physical health were precarious, with most women speaking of living in fear and struggling to make ends meet.

A vibrant young Moroccan woman in her twenties, divorced with a small child, Fatima worked as a pharmacist. As an adolescent, she had moved to Spain with her family, and her father benefited from local legislation enabling him to work in agricultural jobs. In school, Fatima received extra support to learn Catalan, the primary language of instruction, and was able to catch up to her peers quickly. Economically, it wasn't always easy to find employers willing to sponsor migrants, but there was a clear path to legal residency. Now, Fatima was involved with local non-profits, particularly in interfaith activities, and was an active participant in civic life.

The Moroccan migrants in Barcelona said they were never stopped by the police, had access to decent medical care, and felt they were generally treated with dignity. "There is racism," Fatima told us, "but only when I wear my hijab." She did not wear her hijab at work and otherwise did not feel discriminated against. If she had a problem, she could rely on the police to help. "It's easy to live here," she told us. "There's more stress [unlike in Morocco], but at least we have health and security. The laws aren't a problem…. If you call the police, they come… And if you don't have what you need to live, the state will help you out – they'll give you 420 Euros a month for food if you don't have a job."

Celia, a migrant in her twenties from Honduras, came to the US ten years ago. After a traumatic border crossing, she lived with a controlling uncle in Arizona and worked day and night cleaning offices and washing dishes. Hoping to escape her uncle, Celia moved in with another uncle, who was a heavy drinker and often placed her in compromising situations with his friends. When she tried to return to the first uncle, the second uncle threw her belongings away, including her identity documents.

Joining her father in Florida, she worked as a waitress and met her future husband, who did not want her to work because she would be around other men. Now, Celia spends most of her time caring for their young daughter Raquel, who suffered from diabetes for years before she was properly diagnosed. A parenting class offered at the HOPE CommUnity center helped her become an advocate for her child. "The parenting class gave me the courage to finally leave the house to help Raquel," she told us.

DISCUSSION

In comparison with Fatima's story, Celia's life experiences indicate how the insecurity of undocumented status often forces migrant women into dependence upon male family members. Celia felt trapped in her house, but she feared going out. Fatima, by contrast, worked and had an active social network. Like many women we interviewed, Celia took English classes at the nonprofit, but was limited in being able to engage with society: she could not work and risk deportation and had no options to regularize her status, her mobility restricted by male relatives and by fear.

Our interviewees in Apopka told us that women in abusive situations could not turn to the police, risking deportation and separation from their children. Although the Violence Against Women Act authorizes resident visas for women who are victims of domestic violence, the current political atmosphere in the U.S. means that few women are even able to take the first step of reporting domestic violence to the local police. By contrast, in Barcelona, local nonprofits worked with government financial support to house women

seeking to escape domestic violence, offering language and job training so they could support themselves. The Florida nonprofits also devoted considerable time to supporting migrant families split apart by deportations, but migrant women in Florida experienced greater threats to their psychological and physical health because they could not depend on the law to protect them. Studies have demonstrated that being undocumented and female in the U.S. is associated with negative health consequences because of the embodied impacts of stress on women's bodies (Lopez et al. 2017: 4).

CONCLUSION

U.S. immigration policy reflects and perpetuates gender hierarchies for migrant women from the Global South, determining how immigrants are able to access citizenship and all of its accompanying benefits (Salcido and Menjívar 2013: 343). Interviews conducted with women in these two communities demonstrate that the absence of legislation to legalize the status of undocumented migrants in the U.S., combined with a lack of local programs promoting integration, prevents women migrants' full participation in society. Women additionally experience the everyday structural violence of being unable to rely on law enforcement or to access resources such as healthcare. In Catalonia, regional integration policies worked alongside nonprofits to offer migrants the potential for a documented and inclusive future. While migrant women in Barcelona are not immune from racism and patriarchal constraints, the criminalized experience of migration in the United States exacerbates women's vulnerability, simultaneously placing them outside the protections of the state while still subjecting them to legal and social control at every level.

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