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### **Mexican Immigrant Women's Resilience in the Face of Crises**

(July 2014) – A new [Gallup poll](#) reveals that one in six people now call immigration the most important problem facing the U.S. In a time when immigration has become a focus of concern, *Gender & Society* research, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology, contributes a perspective rarely considered – how women seek immigration as a means to improving their lives, yet find life in the U.S. more stressful and less fulfilling than their home of origin.

In the study “[Women's Political Engagement in a Mexican Sending Community: Migration as Crisis and the Struggle to Sustain an Alternative](#),” sociologist Abigail Andrews at the University of California, San Diego, finds that migrant women who had come to the U.S. seeking a better life choose to return to their home village due to unfavorable immigration laws.

As one woman Andrews talked with put it: “I like my village; I like it a lot. There, you don't have this fear of going out, like here. There, no, because you're free.”

Andrews made an important discovery: She found that returning immigrant women bring something quite meaningful back with them – the motivation to improve the economic and political climate of their village in Mexico.

The new study to be published in August 2014 finds that in the case of San Miguel, a Mixtec community in Oaxaca, Mexico, the returned migrant women went on to predominate in civic affairs, attend and lead meetings, vote, and hold public office – political activities formerly exclusive to men.

Andrews learned of the women's enhanced contributions when she studied women's political engagement both in the U.S. and in San Miguel. Her research draws on 51 interviews (29 women and 22 men), a community survey, and a year of participant observation identifying the harsh conditions faced by women from San Miguel when migrating to Southern California.

### **Migrant Women in U.S. before Returning to Mexico**

While economic hardship at home prompted women's migration to California, once in the U.S., with little access to legalization, the women describe lives filled with fear of authorities, stress, and domestic violence. Fueled by a fear of deportation, their U.S. experience compelled migrant women to seek an alternative life back in San Miguel.

One woman recounts, "In the U.S., I came to live a life of abuse. I lived in poverty in San Miguel, but in the U.S. I came to suffer even more."

### **Andrews's research documents the extent of the adverse impact of U.S. immigration control:**

- Sixty-seven percent of migrants feared driving and 64 percent feared walking in public.
- Interviewees experienced labor abuse, usually connected to their undocumented status.
- Migrants described feeling "discriminated against, immobile, and exploited," which led to 89 percent wanting to return home.

The men did not feel they had the option to leave that some of the women did. One male interviewee explains, "In the village there's little hope of supporting your children ... So, with [economic] things as they are currently, it will be better to stay [in the U.S.] – to fight with immigration control, to fight with the police, to fight with the racists, but to stay."

### **Returned Migrant Women Creating a Better Home**

With support from migrant men in California, the female political leadership in San Miguel played a central role in overturning the elite political organization that was dominating their communities, the PRI. Although women continue to face economic struggles in San Miguel, many feel that life in the village is "great." The women even gained influence over state resources – funds the PRI had embezzled. Moreover, women's political voice as economic leaders helped give them leverage to influence local practices around domestic violence, divorce, and rights to property and children.

The growing attention to immigration reform including [President Barack Obama's initiative](#) to improve immigrants' lives in the U.S. may reduce some of the hardships migrants face. Doing so may increase the nation's ability to benefit from the resilience of the migrant women of San Miguel.

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**Source:** Andrews, Abigail. 2014. “[Women’s Political Engagement in a Mexican Sending Community: Migration as Crisis and the Struggle to Sustain an Alternative](#)” to be published August *Gender & Society*.

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### **Related Experts**

*Interviews available upon request*

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Professor of Sociology, University of Southern California, Author of *Paradise Transplanted: Migration and the Making of California Gardens* (UC Press 2014). [sotelo@usc.edu](mailto:sotelo@usc.edu).

Katharine M. Donato, Professor and Chair of Sociology, Vanderbilt University, Co-author of “Shifts in the Employment Outcomes among Mexican Migrants to the United States.” [katharine.donato@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:katharine.donato@vanderbilt.edu)

Irene Bloemraad, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, Co-author of *Rallying for Immigrant Rights*. [bloemr@berkeley.edu](mailto:bloemr@berkeley.edu)

### **Further information**

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on Twitter: [@Gend\\_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at [misra@soc.umass.edu](mailto:misra@soc.umass.edu).

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women’s lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at [jsprague@ku.edu](mailto:jsprague@ku.edu). Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and [facebook.com/SocWomen](https://www.facebook.com/SocWomen).