

<https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2115078>

Articles

Gender dimensions of Covid-19: transborder women's narratives in the Mexicali-Calexico case

Dimensiones de género ante el COVID-19: narrativas de mujeres transfronterizas en el contexto Mexicali-Caléxico

Magdalena Villarreal Martínez^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5644-1126>
Lya Margarita Niño Contreras^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4670-7194>

^a Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Occidente, Guadalajara, Mexico, e-mail: mvillarreal@ciesas.edu.mx

^b Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Mexicali, Mexico, e-mail: lnino@uabc.edu.mx

Abstract

The pandemic has had implications at different levels. This article shows the impact on transborder women whose working lives have been affected, as has their struggle for their rights and their labor as care-workers. We underline the intrinsic articulation between economic and social relations of inhabitants on both sides of the international border, gender dimensions that affect trans-frontier women and the social differentiation that is generated between those that hold one type of document or another after the partial closure of the borderline. We base our analysis on ethnographic cases chosen from a broader sampler (2019-2020) to account for a range of women who have made strides in their processes of autonomy and empowerment, but find themselves made vulnerable by the closure of the borderline.

Keywords: COVID-19, closure of the borderline, transborder women, gender inequalities.

Resumen

La pandemia ha tenido implicaciones a distintos niveles. Aquí se muestra el impacto en mujeres transfronterizas que vieron afectada su vida laboral, la lucha por sus derechos y sus labores como cuidadoras. Se subraya la intrínseca articulación entre las relaciones económicas y sociales de pobladores de ambos lados de la frontera, las dimensiones de género que afectan a las mujeres en contextos transfronterizos y la diferenciación social que se genera entre quienes

Received on November 30, 2020.

Accepted on September 24, 2021.

Published on September 30, 2021.

* Corresponding author:
Magdalena Villarreal. E-mail:
mvillarreal@ciesas.edu.mx

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

CITATION: Villarreal Martínez, M. & Niño Contreras, L. M. (2021). Dimensiones de género ante el COVID-19: narrativas de mujeres transfronterizas en el contexto Mexicali-Caléxico [Gender dimensions of Covid-19: transborder women's narratives in the Mexicali-Calexico case] *Estudios Fronterizos*, 22, e078. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2115078>

poseen un tipo de documento u otro a partir del cierre parcial de la frontera. El análisis se basa en casos etnográficos (2019-2020) elegidos entre una muestra más amplia para dar cuenta de una gama de mujeres que han logrado avances en su proceso de autonomía y empoderamiento, pero se ven vulneradas ante el cierre de la frontera.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, cierre de frontera, mujeres transfronterizas, desigualdad de género.

Introduction

The pandemic has disrupted the daily lives of thousands of people around the world. Each geographic region has been affected in a particular way. The entire planet is shocked, paralyzed, moved, and confused, but then people normalize the pandemic situation and design strategies to manage it.

This is the situation on the northern border of Mexico, although it has distinctive characteristics. The pandemic has hit with waves of varying magnitude. The region is shaken by the sickness, suffering, and death¹ and tends to understand the phenomenon by imputing responsibility to “the other”. “The other who comes from abroad”, “the other who brings infection”.

On the one hand, there is talk of Europeans who may have been carriers of the virus in the maquiladora plants, where thousands of workers live together under the same roof. The daily commuting of people between one country and the other, the frenetic commercial activity, Mexican workers who go to work in the agricultural fields of the Imperial Valley, cross-border students, young people from the U.S. side of the border who go to Mexico to visit nightclubs, and U.S. citizens who travel to Mexicali for health care are some important factors. On the other side of the border, “the other” is the Mexican and those who cross the Mexico-United States border. Therefore, the border had to be closed, and that is what was done. This has affected thousands of people who crossed every day to work, attend to bureaucratic procedures, and take care of the sick. As mothers, wives, caregivers, workers, and social activists, women were doubly victimized by the pandemic and the closing of the border.

The following pages present this situation, showing the truncated strategies of different women affected by the pandemic and the partial closure of the border. A crisis of this magnitude reveals an abundance of processes to which little attention is paid in the precipitated daily routine. One of them is the impact of the pandemic on women. Our perspective resorts to a gender perspective because women assume certain roles with their gender identity, and certain roles are imposed on them. This reveals how the pandemic and border restrictions impact women who have a cross-border status. Such dimension is also emphasized in a United Nations document,

¹ Mexico has had 234 969 deaths due to COVID-19. Mexico is the country with the fourth-highest number of deaths from COVID-19 in the world, behind the United States, Brazil, and India (Forbes Staff, 2021). Deaths from COVID-19, as of August 9, 2020, are 1 339 in Mexicali and 244 for the Imperial Valley (Lara-Valencia & García-Pérez, 2021).

prepared after the AIDS, Ebola, and Zika epidemics, which aimed to strengthen national and international systems for the prevention of and effective response to future health crises. It is a report that strongly recommends focusing attention on the gender dimensions of global health crises (Ruíz, 2021). The study conducted by the *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker* (2020) points out that failure to take gender dimensions into account in the prevention of pandemics could lead to a setback in the fight for gender equity. The study is based on three core concepts with a gender focus: combating gender-based violence, supporting unpaid care, and strengthening women's economic security. The results show that "only one in eight countries has implemented measures to protect women and girls from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic" (Mujeres, género, violencia, pandemia y políticas públicas, 2020).

Regarding support for unpaid care, the study talks about the role of women in caring for others while at the same time having to maintain their work performance. It warns that this would lead women to quit their jobs or decrease their productivity (*COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*, 2020). Women devote three times as many hours to caregiving as men. When caregiving tasks are intensified, there is a risk that young women who study or work will drop out (Mass, in Alavez, 2020). As mentioned by Avendaño et al. (2020):

(...) the literature shows another type of impact on women in the presence of COVID-19, which is the interruption of reproductive and maternal health services. The director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Carissa F. Etienne, warned that the continued interruption of health services for women due to COVID-19 could erase more than 20 years of progress in reducing maternal deaths and increasing access to family planning (*COVID-19 ocasiona impactos "devastadores" en las mujeres, afirma la directora de la ops*, 2021)

In the following lines, we focus on these effects. Living in a border zone interrupts circuits and adds significant problems to the lives of the border population. The first part of the text discusses these circuits, while the second part presents the case of women in the face of the pandemic. The analysis is based on the narratives of women who live through and suffer these situations. The aim is to highlight the creative ways in which people find solutions and their implications.

We take the case of the Mexicali-Calexico cross-border zone, which shows the interweaving of diverse activities and economic flows on both sides of the border, demonstrating that the two national economies are permeable and interpenetrating in many ways. The border is a dividing line, but more than anything else, it is a fertile transit hub for those who cross it daily. Border crossing restrictions resulting from the pandemic directly impact these processes and, in particular, the lives of women with tourist visas who cannot cross into the United States due to the partial closure of the border.

The text is based on three studies² that explore the reality of men and women who cross the border daily.

The main basis of this analysis is ethnographic work, which, given the limitations due to the pandemic, was carried out through different means. As far as possible, people were visited in their homes or living spaces. However, many phone calls and communications were made through internet chats, FaceTime, and other means, in addition to a systematic review of secondary sources of information, as well as in-depth interviews. The cases mentioned below concern women between 21 and 74 years of age. One has only a high school diploma, another has a university education in the United States, and another is pursuing higher education in Mexicali. Two are engaged in paid domestic work, one works in the fields in the United States, another in a department store in the United States, and one is contracted to care for the elderly, also in the United States. Five live in Calexico, California, and three in Mexicali, Baja California. Of the latter, only two have tourist visas, as does one of those living in Calexico. The rest of those living in the United States are U.S. residents or citizens.

Border life

The Mexico-United States border has been characterized by its great dynamism. In 2020, the Mexico-Mexicali border port registered more than 2.5 million movements between both sides of the border, while before the health emergency, more than 3.7 million people crossed the border (Baja California: instauran sistema de reconocimiento facial en Garita de Caléxico. Autoridades norteamericanas instalaron tecnología de comparación biométrica y facial en el cruce con Mexicali, 2021).

Mexicali, Baja California, is located on the northern border of Mexico with the United States. Calexico, its twin city in California, is located in the Imperial Valley, a large desert converted into an agricultural area thanks to irrigation brought from the Colorado River, but above all to the labor force coming mainly from Mexicali, a city of more than one million inhabitants, almost six times more than the Imperial Valley. Some of these workers and those involved in other economic activities in the United States (waiters, cooks, domestic workers, caregivers for the elderly, among others) seek to obtain residency in that country or acquire dual citizenship. This study found quite a few families in which some members are U.S.

² *Quoras, pesos y dólares: flujos de divisas y finanzas en el caso de mujeres transmigrantes de Mexicali-Caléxico y sus valles* (Niño et al., 2012). *Prácticas sociales de mujeres transfronterizas: el caso de Mexicali-Caléxico* (Niño & Villarreal, 2013a). These projects were carried out at the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California; and the project *Juggling Currencies in Transborder Contexts* (Villarreal et al., 2015) was conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion at the University of California, Irvine, and involved the application of a survey, participant observation, and formal and informal interviews with men and women who live on both sides of the international border or regularly commute between the two countries.

citizens and others Mexican. One sibling may be a U.S. citizen, another a resident, and others undocumented when they enter the United States. Legal status in the United States has an important impact on household economic strategies. Occupational segregation has been an important feature of the labor market and is becoming more prevalent for Mexican immigrants. In rural contexts, unstable and precarious employment is the norm. A significant number of workers are employed in the fields, in the so-called *corridos*, that is, they migrate or move to other agricultural areas because the agricultural season in the Imperial Valley is very short, so they move to the Coachella Valley and the San Joaquin Valley in California, as well as to Arizona and Texas. The above is done to keep both their income and their unemployment checks as high as possible; however, the strategy has a very high social cost. Precarious and overcrowded housing has been documented as a factor in exposure to the COVID-19 virus in agricultural work in California (Gomez, 2020).

Those who are more knowledgeable about the intricacies of the labor market may even receive unemployment compensation in the U.S. during certain seasons of the year while they commute further north or to Mexico on the *corridos*. One strategy involves using several social security numbers (usually acquired illegally) to appear unemployed with one and work with the other.

The above marks the kind of unequal social relations forged at the border, which a significant number of people—most of them Mexican or Mexican-American—cross every day to work. Others cross to help in the care of children and the elderly (López, 1994, 2020; Villarreal & Niño, 2016). Border crossing for work and residential purposes is most common (Ojeda, 1994); as is crossing to attend school (Meza, 1989; Rocha & Orraca, 2018) or for social reproduction purposes (Ojeda, 1994; Villarreal & Niño, 2016; Vargas & Coubès, 2017). However, more recently, authors such as Orraca (2019) have identified a decrease in the transmigrant population, a phenomenon accompanied by a change of residence.

The main point of the border is that, although it constitutes a division site, following Campos and Odgers (2012), it is possible to say that when economic realities are differentiated, this generates important values on one side and the other, but it is also an important point of interaction. This is how mobility acquires great significance. As the authors say:

The border can be a bridge, a wall, or both simultaneously, depending on the ability of a person to cross it. These characteristics allow border regions to expose the contradictions between the flows and barriers of the modern world: border mobility did not occur because of the weakening of borders, but despite their reinforcement (...) the ability to “be mobile” is a critical resource in border regions (...) (Campos & Odgers, 2012)

In this context, diverse practices, cultures, and regulations, often conceived as discrete, are interwoven and generate relations of social differentiation and power. Although such power is not in the absolute possession of U.S. Customs or government

agents, they exercise a significant degree of control, which is most clearly seen in the context of pandemic restrictions.

However, the actors involved manage to create some room for maneuver. They find loopholes where they can obtain some benefit to continue operating the different cross-border processes. Sometimes this provides a short-term benefit, but it favors the continuation of inequality and the reproduction of power relations.

Partial border closure and its impact on women

In March 2020, the United States decreed the partial closure of its border with Mexico, which has since been extended every month until November 2021. In this way, it limited land border crossings to essential activities such as medical, school, and work activities for its nationals or those with permanent residency and work visas and prohibited it for those with tourist visas. However, historically, and despite the need for a legal document to work in the United States, hundreds of people used to cross the border daily with a tourist visa and work in activities such as construction, hotels, restaurants, businesses, gardening, house cleaning, care for children and the elderly or people with an illness or disability, or in agriculture, among others.

The impacts of COVID-19 and restrictive policies on the Mexico-United States international border crossing have not been minor among those with a cross-border lifestyle,³ particularly women who live in Mexicali and used to cross constantly to Calexico with tourist visas, either to work, to follow administrative or legal processes before the U.S. Supreme Court, and who have been affected by such restrictions.

Nora and Mayra have tourist visas, and until before the pandemic, they used to cross into Calexico daily to work. The former cleaned houses and the latter worked in agriculture. Yadira does not have a visa but has an administrative process with the social security offices in El Centro, California, due to the death of the father of her two daughters, who have a special condition. She has seen her process slowed down because it is not considered essential in the pandemic safety protocols in the United States. However, for her and her family, the completion of the process is a high priority.

Domestic work, such as the case of Nora, is a historical cross-border activity, very much appreciated by housewives to help with daily expenses or to support the family, as well as by students to cover school expenses. Many of the interviewees perform or have performed this activity, which is well paid in the United States. Nora's education was a key piece in the processing of her tourist visa, and the visa has been an important resource for her, since the domestic work she performs in the Imperial Valley helps

³ The U.S. policy of social differentiation applied at its border crossing has been widely criticized and considered ineffective. There are even those who point out that rather than having a medical rationale, it has a political one (*Cierre de frontera México-EU por Covid-19, decisión política, no sanitaria: WSJ*, 2020), and has had several impacts on the border, one of which is the excessive waiting times to cross the line due to the reduction of personnel at the border checkpoints, as well as the reduction of lanes at the border ports, including the reduction of the checkpoint opening hours, so that the waiting time to cross at the Mexicali border crossing point can be up to eight hours (*Registran hasta 8 horas de espera en Garita Centro*, 2020).

alleviate the constraints of her domestic finances. She used to go to Calexico and the Imperial Valley to do discreet domestic work in friends' homes from her teenage years. Restrictions on passage to the United States on a tourist visa have prevented her from crossing. She tries to compensate for this with other activities in Mexico that are not as well remunerated and that slightly supplement her husband's low salary.

Nora had already tried to resolve her situation in several ways, including suggesting to her uncle-in-law that he marry her and asking a friend to hire her before the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) as a domestic worker, but none of her initiatives were successful.

On the other hand, Yadira has a file before the Supreme Court in the United States, which has had to be suspended. The reason for the hearing before this body is that the father of her young son was a U.S. citizen who recently lost his life in a work accident. The young father of the family had life insurance through work, but her mother-in-law is fighting the insurance benefit in the Supreme Court. Her mother-in-law does not recognize the child as her grandchild and is asking that the insurance money goes to her and her minor son, listed as an economic dependent of her deceased son on his tax return with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Yadira has been living a cross-border lifestyle for about three years. She is attending high school at a private school in Mexicali while at the same time working "in the fields" in the United States to pay for her studies and to support her family. Generally, in agricultural work, a person works 35 to 45 hours per week with an income of \$80 per day when documented and around \$70 per day when working with only a passport. Therefore, it can be said that the average salary that a female worker receives when she migrates to work in these activities is equivalent to more than fifteen times the general Mexican minimum wage (Sández et al., 2016).

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Yadira usually crossed into Calexico early on Sundays during the high season, trying to carry as light a bag as possible so as to not give away the fact that she worked "in the fields" to the agents of the USCIS. From Sunday to Wednesday, she would stay overnight in the Imperial Valley with her in-laws because she used to work from Monday to Thursday "in the fields" in the Imperial Valley and on Thursday she would return to Mexicali to attend school and continue with her studies.

She is currently unable to cross into the United States due to restrictions imposed on tourist visas. This has affected her a lot in financial terms, but also in her state of mind because by not being able to cross, she missed an appointment before the U.S. Supreme Court. In the last communication with Yadira, she was worried and desperate about the situation.

The Supreme Court announced the suspension of oral hearings due to the coronavirus as of March. Most of its members are 65 years of age or older and are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill. The court said in a statement that, although the oral hearings are suspended without a new date, some

judges have conducted hearings via telephone. (*Coronavirus: la Corte Suprema de EE.UU. suspendió sus actividades por primera vez en más de un siglo, 2020*)⁴

However, the telephone meeting option only applies to U.S. citizens.

The case of Mayra involves a claim for child support for her disabled daughters at the social security offices in the United States. Mayra separated from the father of her daughter, who is a U.S. citizen and does not provide child support, forcing Mayra to work as a domestic worker in Mexicali. She soon found it necessary to stop this activity to better care for her daughters, who have a special condition, motor neuron disease, an atrophy that affects the brain and spinal cord's neurons (nerve cells) and causes weakness and muscle atrophy. When she left domestic work, she consulted with a lawyer who helped her file a legal claim for child support against the biological father of her daughters in the United States.

Without a visa to cross into the United States, but with the support of a lawyer, Mayra managed to win the claim for child support for her daughters a few years ago. She felt financially free to devote more time to caring for them, assisting them, and taking them to their physical therapies since, as Mayra says, caring for her daughters is a 365-day-a-year job. However, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, her ex-husband passed away, and the social security offices stopped her child support check. Since Mayra cannot cross into the United States, a lawyer is assisting her in this process. However, the social security offices are closed, or the number of cases handled has decreased drastically. In this regard, Jaral, a lawyer and activist from the Imperial Valley, says the following:

To prevent the spread of the virus, government offices, embassies, and U.S. consulates have been closed, which has affected people who wanted to renew their tourist visas. The pandemic has also led to the closure, for example, of the social security office where many people go to fight for pensions, as is the case of husbands who died. Women cannot cross the border to get their benefits as widows or the pensions for their children paid through the social security system (J. Jaral, personal communication, October 9, 2020).

Another drastic case is that of Juana, who lives in Mexicali. Her family emigrated and lives in the United States, but she only has a tourist visa. She is the youngest daughter in the family, born when all her brothers and sisters had emigrated together. Her father was the one who made the petition to the USCIS. Now her brothers and sisters have permanent residency, except for her. She explains that

4

Concerning the Supreme Court, the only other time in 85 years that it was closed for trials was in October 2001, when anthrax was detected in the mailroom of the court. That led the justices to hold arguments in federal court, a half-mile from the Supreme Court. Within a week and after a thorough cleanup, the court reopened. In 1918, when the court still met inside the Capitol, arguments were postponed for a month because of the Spanish flu pandemic, and in the early years of the nation, in August 1793 and August 1798, adjustments were made because of yellow fever outbreaks, the court said. (*Coronavirus: la Corte Suprema de EE.UU. suspendió sus actividades por primera vez en más de un siglo, 2020*)

there are promises from her family to help her emigrate once they become U.S. citizens. In the meantime, the father of Juana became seriously ill, and because of the border closure, she has not been able to visit him. She tells us that until before the pandemic, she visited him weekly.

A similar case is that of Blanca, who emigrated more than 20 years ago but lives in Mexicali. She emigrated with the help of her ex-husband, but her children did not receive that help. She is currently bedridden, and her children, who have visas but work in the United States, have not been able to visit her.

These cases reveal the intrinsic relationship between the population and the authorities on both sides of the border. It is not only a matter of economic circuits but also legal, kinship, and family responsibility. These procedures are usually carried out by women who have achieved a degree of emancipation or even empowerment that makes it possible for them to find their way around the relevant offices and manage multiple economic, professional, and family care activities with a certain degree of efficiency. The closing of the border endangers this fragile balance, causing many to go back to depending on their ex-partner or their families. The above is in addition to the problems caused directly by the pandemic, including those who have to care for the sick or those who, as mothers, assume the role of teachers and tutors of their children who only take classes online. Mothers are usually the ones who are forced to spend up to six hours with their children when they take online classes and to verify that the child understands the explanations and follows the instructions. If the teacher asks for material, the mother has to make sure it is accessible. If they ask for a homework assignment, she sits down with the child to make sure he or she does it. Countless mothers comment on how difficult this fourth work shift is for them. In addition to the above, they must be careful every minute that their son or daughter does not get distracted on the Internet instead of participating in class.

In the cross-border context, this situation worsens, as some children live in Mexicali and study in the United States. Mothers must ensure that they have the necessary equipment, software, and materials. Often, they cross the border to get some of these materials or to return them. Their work as women intensifies. This is in a city where a very large percentage of the population works or has some kind of legal process on the other side of the border, in addition to the fact that many living in Mexico have their children studying in the United States.

Gender dimensions in the cross-border region in the face of the pandemic

As mentioned, many Mexican women commute daily between the sister cities of Mexicali and Calexico in search of financial and social livelihoods. They work cleaning houses and offices or taking care of grandchildren or pets. They are seamstresses, employees in agricultural or health companies. They announce the departure of buses or cabs bound for casinos such as the Golden Acorn, which is just over 100 kilometers from Calexico, or even those in Las Vegas, which are located just over

550 kilometers from this same point, and whose stop is located a few blocks from the border; the meeting point may even be the fast-food restaurant located a few meters from the border crossing. Other women offer trips to different parts of the region, such as Heber, Holtville, El Centro, Imperial, or Coachella; others live there, but their relatives are in Mexico, and their finances are framed in Mexican social and cultural contexts. Still, others move around in the *corridos*, following a particular crop. The efforts of these women have been a fundamental contribution to the family finances of important sectors of the population on both sides of the border.

However, as Villarreal (2017) has emphasized in other texts, “gender identities play an important role in demarcating spaces and shaping forms of access.” Many of these women must work double and triple shifts, for which they receive little or no remuneration. Moreover, although their monetary contribution is equal to or greater than that of men, it tends to be valued less. Additionally, anguish and anxiety are intertwined with economic practices based on fear, not only of being exploited, a situation that many women accept to gain access to an income, but also of being rejected or harassed. The struggle to increase and make their income and resources work involves many aspects of daily life, in which discourses and classifications are reproduced that mark inequality and violence.

As if that were not enough, most of these women spend all their income on other family members. The resources they keep for themselves are scarce. Multiple studies on household economics (Chant, 2003; Enríquez, 1998; Folbre, 1982; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Harris, 1981; Moore, 1988; Roldán, 1988; Villarreal, 2007) have shown the lack of homogeneity in the distribution of income and resources within the household. This situation is very frequent among border crossers, particularly because many women are single mothers.

Family configurations can take various forms, including in terms of nationality and citizenship. The above is not only due to their organization around employment. Many parents send their children to study in Calexico or San Diego “to learn English” and some families decide to have their children born in the United States to acquire dual citizenship. A family may live in two dwellings (one on each side of the border), one of which also houses relatives. However, it should be noted that having a relative is no guarantee of support. The risks involved in this type of practice are well known. People learn to live in fear, with some uncertainty that their strategies will be successful.

The financial calculations made by women who cross the border daily to work or carry out economic activities tend to be made in both dollars and pesos. In Mexico, a mental conversion is made into dollars, and in the United States into pesos. However, in general, calculations are made with only partial information. An example is the case of giving birth in the United States without health insurance, which is risky and expensive. Also critical is the lack of access to information that many women need to work on certain farms, which is why they are hired to work in crops with poor pay and working conditions. For example, working in lettuce cultivation is not considered a good job: people have to wait for the ice to dissolve, and are only paid as soon as they go into the fields and start cutting (Niño & Villarreal, 2013b). Similarly, many women work with asparagus, which, as they say, “is very hard work and also very poorly paid.”

Those who manage to access work in other crops based on their social networks or their ability to work can obtain a slightly higher income.

However, social mobility comes at a high cost, as can also be seen in the case of Nora, who must hire herself out as a domestic worker in the United States to study. This involves caring for her daughter, keeping her home in order with food ready and proper cleaning, and losing time in crossing the border. Other calculations that need to be made have to do with tax refunds. Non-financial elements weigh heavily in the calculation process, as explained by a woman who now receives a pension from the United States. She regrets that she missed out on many things with her children because she worked “in the fields” and went on the *corridos*.

On the other hand, the most vulnerable people are also frequently recruited in high-demand care services. It is no coincidence that in the classified section of Mexican newspapers, people with tourist visas are solicited to work in Calexico or in the Imperial Valley to care for the elderly or minors. These activities are carried out in extremely precarious conditions where people work up to twelve hours a day for USD 150 a week (García & Niño, 2011).

In sum, it can be said that gender differentiation directly impacts employment and remuneration options. Women play fundamental roles in the economic and financial functioning of households. Being a woman facilitates certain paths and obstructs others.

Cross-border women combine different types of investment, savings, and debt, in dollars and pesos, and seek different types of government support in both Mexico and the United States. However, financial issues are intimately intertwined with social, cultural, and legal processes. In other words, economic processes do not exist in isolation. Thus, their economic strategies include monetary and non-monetary practices to ensure their children's future and their stability. These practices, formatted in diverse cultural and regulatory languages, are combined and intertwined as they are carried out in different countries (Villarreal & Niño, 2016).

This is a “financial culture” that has been little analyzed, in which risk measurement comes into play, as well as social categories and differentiation. In order to make decisions, it is necessary to account for social, economic, and cultural factors in which gender identity plays a fundamental role. However, there is a degree of wiggle room in which they can draw on one regulatory, financial, and social system to make up for deficits in another. Understanding how these calculations are made is necessary to understand the financial practices in which women play a key role.

The ravages of the pandemic

The pandemic has made the already difficult process even more difficult for women, as seen in the cases of Teresa, Andrea, and Dorian. Teresa has worked for the U.S. government taking care of an older woman. However, she found it too difficult to continue with the job and resigned, since she had to go with her on weekends, and it was precisely on those days that she felt it most necessary to take care of her family. Since then, she has been doing various activities to earn money while she has more

control of her daily schedule. For example, she sells beauty products, organizes garage sales, and has even helped her friends clean their houses on both the Mexican and U.S. sides. All these activities make it possible for her to keep her credit cards up to date and make some purchases for herself and her teenage children. She was also involved in conducting studies for the GED⁵ in English and for the citizenship test. However, none of these activities give her retirement credits.

The husband of Teresa recently became infected with COVID-19 and also infected their daughter. She was caring for both of them in their home in the Imperial Valley during the isolation period. Just as they recovered, her younger brother, who lives alone in Mexicali, tested positive, and she went to care for him. Within days, she also tested positive and remained in isolation with her brother in Mexicali until she regained her health. A doctor in Mexicali was treating them. Fortunately, neither she nor her brother suffered from any comorbidity, and they soon recovered.

On the other hand, Andrea had to interrupt her nursing studies when her first daughter was born, a little more than twenty years ago. She regrets that she has not been able to return to school to date and may never do so again. She says she cannot stop working. She went for almost seven years without working for a salary because, at that time, her husband supported the family, and she was mainly in charge of the housework such as food preparation and care and cleaning of the house. She recently separated from her husband, which prompted her to return to work. She works with an agency specializing in the care of people in the Imperial Valley. She says she struggled a lot to get into the company, and at the same time, she is surprised that it is difficult to get into it because it is a very low-paying job. She believes that people are interested in that type of work because of the flexibility in the schedules. Furthermore, many women look to have flexibility in their work schedules to accommodate them with their family duties. She says that if an appointment or something unexpected comes up, she can call the office to be replaced, but it has to be at the beginning of the month so as not to give her a bad record.

Andrea comments that sometimes there are simpler, or less demanding, cases than others, such as when the people she cares for can still fend for themselves; that is, they can change, bathe, and cook for themselves. Sometimes they simply want company, but on other occasions, it is quite the opposite. For example, she explains that bedridden people are very heavy, which makes care difficult. However, she thinks that the main problem with this job is how poorly paid it is and having to leave her children alone all day in the apartment while other people enjoy unemployment checks.

Although the cost of leaving her children alone in the apartment is high, she says that if it were not for the pandemic, they would be in school and not at home taking online classes, so she would not be able to take advantage of this streak of working twelve hours a day (she has not been offered so many hours of work before) because she has no one to pick them up from school. However, she says that this streak will soon come to an end. A few days ago, they were threatened with a 30% cut in their working hours.

⁵ The GED or General Educational Development Test is a certification for students who have completed the required credits at the U.S. or Canadian high school level.

Andrea also explained that her sister, who lives in Mexicali, had got sick with COVID-19. She regretted not being able to support her due to her work, family commitments, and fear of being infected. However, she was in communication with her via telephone and WhatsApp.

Like many women, Dorian, who lives in the United States but has her home in Mexicali, must work to support her family, most of whom are already in the U.S., although some sisters are in Mexico. She has been a cashier at a well-known retail chain in Calexico for several years but realized that the company was not taking the pandemic seriously enough when they did not properly implement safety protocols to protect them from the beginning. To some extent, she feels supported because the company provides her with good benefits, such as medical care. However, she says, the risk is there. She recently took a vacation because she was under much pressure and states that three people at work have died from COVID-19. She says that she went to Mexicali during her vacation, the first time she had crossed the border in several months.

Andrea and Teresa, having documents to stay in the United States, have no geographic mobility problems. They can go to Mexico and return to the United States without major complications. However, as can be seen, they do not escape gender conditioning factors and are the ones who take care of others, even at the cost of their health.

Likewise, it is possible to speak of economic violence when women like Dorian are forced to continue working under risky conditions, like Andrea, who receives much lower pay for her work, or Teresa, who has to juggle her time to pay off her debts. It is difficult to dissociate the exclusion, discrimination, and economic violence women suffer from social and cultural violence. The case of women who are victims of violence and are responsible for the care, finances, and health of the family is a story that repeats itself again and again. The impediments to working outside the home, the need to assume responsibility for the children, and physical aggression affect their possibilities of securing economic security and wellbeing. Harassment is also present in the so-called "market forces." These are complex and involve a range of regulations and draw on sophisticated technologies and increasingly specialized information, but are ultimately shaped by relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions mediated by representations, estimates, and projections of value, involving factors of nationality, legal status, class, and gender.

Economic security, unpaid care, and violence against women influence poor community management of the pandemic. In the cross-border zone, this problem is of great significance. The protection of families, particularly of women and gender relations, has been neglected.

Although there has been a slight economic recovery since June, men are returning to the labor market faster than women. Many of them are returning to jobs with disadvantageous conditions because of their disproportionate burden within the household. 53% of working women are concentrated in sectors that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic and may be slowest to recover. These sectors include accommodation and food, retail trade, and other services; women are underrepresented in leadership positions in the public and private sectors. This reduces the likelihood that the needs of women will be reflected in decision-making. (Avendaño et al., 2020)

From April to July 2020, the percentage of self-employed women increased from 14% to 23%, while the number of unpaid female workers doubled (Telephone Occupation and Employment Survey [Encuesta Telefónica de Ocupación y Empleo, ETOE] in Alavez, 2020). This problem represents a ten-year setback in the fight for gender equity, according to Mía Perdomo, chief executive of Aequales, a company specialized in reducing gender gaps in the work environment (Alavez, 2020).

As can be seen in the cases presented above, it is common for women to be abused, paid lower wages than men, and be the ones responsible for raising the family, both in economic terms and in terms of health. As explained, with the pandemic came increased inequalities in terms of income and increased responsibilities for family health, and most women are responsible for pursuing online education with their children.

It is important to mention that

pandemics and outbreaks have differential effects on women and men. From the risk of exposure and biological sensitivity to infection to the social and economic consequences, people's experiences are likely to vary according to their biological and gender characteristics and their interaction with other social determinants. Therefore, global and national strategic plans for COVID-19 preparedness and response must be based on sound gender analysis and ensure meaningful participation of affected groups, including women and girls, in decision making and implementation. (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2020)

Conclusions

The pandemic has been a source of concern from many angles, from daily deaths to the economy. However, it is also of concern because of what it has meant in terms of gender relations. As described above, the pandemic has significantly increased women's work, who must care not only for themselves and their nuclear families but also for more distant relatives and their families. Double shifts, which include work at home and paid work outside the home, become triple shifts as her role as a caregiver increases. To this is added a fourth shift, no less onerous, that of a teacher in the context of the pandemic. In this regard, Lewis (2020), in his analysis, considers that the coronavirus is a disaster for feminism and asks and answers the questions: What do pandemic patients need? Care. What do the elderly who isolate themselves need? Care. What do children who stay home from school need? Care. All of this care, this unpaid care work, will fall more to women.

Women were already in charge of the household, taking care of their families' nutrition, welfare, and health. They have all normalized this as part of their duties as women. Gender inequality has been on the rise.

Economic security is of the utmost importance. Here it is important to note the differentiation in employment and the remuneration they receive for it. Women employed in agricultural circuits, the *corridos*, tend to be relegated to the most difficult and lowest paid jobs. Access to well-paid jobs is restricted by gender attributes,

the devaluation of women and their capabilities, the lack of information given the limitations of social networks and time, and the fact that women are forced to take on responsibility for the household, the sick, and the children, their maintenance, their health, and their education.

On the other hand, women pursuing legal processes in defense of their rights and their children's rights could not continue the struggle because of the border closure. Although, in general, they tend to have made progress in their process of autonomy and empowerment, this process is threatened by the closing of the border with all its implications.

As can be seen, the pandemic, and in particular the restrictions surrounding it, explicitly reveal how the role of women as caregivers and their resignation to earning low salaries and general inequality, have been normalized, in addition to the fact that the UN recommendations to focus on gender dimensions have not been echoed in this region.

In the absence of a gender-sensitive policy, as mentioned in the COVID-19 Global Response Tracker study, the great risk is that the advances made in gender equity will be significantly reversed.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Diana Lizabeth Mendoza Rivera, a public administration student at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, for her assistance with this research.

References

- Alavez, M. (2020, September 28). El virus aumentó la brecha de género laboral. *El Sol de San Luis*. <https://www.elsoldesanluis.com.mx/mexico/sociedad/evolucion-el-virus-aumento-la-brecha-de-genero-laboral-equidad-genero-pandemia-coronavirus-covid-19-imco-campo-laboral-5816368.html>
- Avendaño, M., Cortés, P., Mase, F. & Paredes, R. (2020, September 14). *Diagnóstico IMCO: Mujer en la economía pos-covid*. Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad, A. C. https://imco.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/14092020_Mujer-en-la-economi%CC%81a-pos-covid_Documento.pdf
- Baja California: instauran sistema de reconocimiento facial en Garita de Caléxico. Autoridades norteamericanas instalaron tecnología de comparación biométrica y facial en el cruce con Mexicali. (2021, February 18). *El Herald de México*. <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/nacional/2021/2/18/bajacalifornia-instauran-sistema-de-reconocimiento-facial-en-garita-de-calexico-259730.html>
- Campos, A. & Odgers, O. (2012). Crossing the border: mobility as a resource in the Tijuana/San Diego and Tecún Umán/ Tapachula regions. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 13(26), 9-32. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2012.26.a01>

- Chant, S. (2003). *Female household headship and the feminisation of poverty: facts, fictions and forward strategies*. New Working Paper Series (9). <https://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/assets/documents/research/working-papers/Female-Household-Headship-and-the-Feminisation-of-Poverty.pdf>
- Cierre de frontera México-EU por COVID-19, decisión política, no sanitaria: WSJ*. (2020, October 3). Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/noticias-cierre-frontera-mexico-eu-covid-19-decision-politica-no-sanitaria-wsj/>
- Coronavirus: la Corte Suprema de EE.UU. suspendió sus actividades por primera vez en más de un siglo*. (2020, March 16). Infobae. <https://www.infobae.com/america/eeuu/2020/03/16/coronavirus-la-corte-suprema-de-eeuu-suspendio-sus-actividades-por-primera-vez-en-mas-de-un-siglo/>
- COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*. (2020). UNWOMEN-UNDP. <https://data.undp.org/gendertacker/>
- COVID-19 ocasiona impactos “devastadores” en las mujeres, afirma la directora de la ops*. (2021, May 26). OPS/OMS. <https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/26-5-2021-covid-19-ocasiona-impactos-devastadores-mujeres-afirma-directora-ops>
- Enríquez, R. (1998). Pobreza y hogares de jefatura femenina en México. In R. Gallardo & J. Osorio (Coords.), *Los rostros de la pobreza: el debate. Tomo II*. (pp. 251-297). Iteso/Universidad Iberoamericana.
- Folbre, N. (1982). Exploitation comes home: a critique of the Marxian theory of family labour. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 6(4), 317-329.
- Forbes Staff. (2021, July 11). *México reporta 62 nuevas muertes y suma 234 969 decesos por COVID-19*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/mexico-reporta-62-nuevas-muertes-y-suma-234969-decesos-por-covid-19/>
- García, N. & Niño, L. (2011, September 6-11). *Migración femenina, trabajo doméstico remunerado y capital social en Mexicali, Baja California* [presentation]. XXVIII Congreso de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología (ALAS). Recife, Brasil.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996). *The end of capitalism (as we knew it). A feminist critique of political economy*. Blackwell.
- Gomez, M. (2020, June 10). In los campos de California, los hacinados trabajadores agrícolas propagan el coronavirus. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/california/articulo/2020-06-10/en-los-campos-de-california-los-hacinados-trabajadores-agricolas-propagan-el-coronavirus>
- Harris, O. (1981). Households as natural units. In K. Young, C. Wolkowitz & R. McCullagh (Eds), *Of marriage and the market: women's subordination in international perspective*. CSE Books.
- Lara-Valencia, F. & García-Pérez, H. (2021). Las fronteras de la pandemia: lecciones para la gobernanza y la cooperación en las ciudades de la frontera México-Estados Unidos. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2104067>
- Lewis, H. (2020, March 19). The coronavirus is a disaster for feminism. Pandemics affect men and women differently. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>

- López, S. (1994). Mujeres y redes familiares en la producción social de los hogares transfronterizos. In N. Ojeda & S. López (Coords.), *Familias transfronterizas en Tijuana: dos estudios complementarios* (pp. 51-74, Serie Cuadernos 6). El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- López, S. (2020). Cuidado a través de la frontera: trayectorias transfronterizas de cuidados en la región Tijuana-San Diego. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2002044>
- Meza, A. (1989). Educación y migración en la frontera Mexicali-Caléxico. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 8(18-19), 136-147. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.1989.18-19.a08>
- Moore, H. (1988). *Feminism and Anthropology*. Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Mujeres, género, violencia, pandemia y políticas públicas. (2020, October 11). *Diario Jornada*. <https://jornadaonline.com/mujeres-genero-violencia-pandemia-y-politicas-publicas/>
- Niño, L. & Villarreal, M. (2013a). Flujos transfronterizos: intercambios y transacciones. El caso de las mujeres mexicanas que se trasladan cotidianamente en la frontera entre Mexicali y Caléxico. In G. Macías & L. Parada (Coords.), *Mujeres, su participación económica en la sociedad* (pp. 149-166). Editorial Universitaria Libros que transforman-Universidad de Guadalajara. <http://repositorio.cualtos.udg.mx:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/792/1/Mujeres%2C%20su%20participaci%C3%B3n%20econ%C3%B3mica%20en%20la%20sociedad.pdf>
- Niño, L. & Villarreal, M. (2013b). *Prácticas sociales de mujeres transfronterizas: el caso de Mexicali-Caléxico*. Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.
- Niño, L., Villarreal, M. & Arriaga R. (2012). *Quoras, pesos y dólares: flujos de divisas y finanzas en el caso de mujeres transmigrantes de Mexicali-Caléxico y sus valles*. Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.
- Ojeda, N. (1994). Familias transfronterizas en Tijuana: Migración y trabajo internacional. In N. Ojeda & S. López (Coords.), *Familias transfronterizas en Tijuana: dos estudios complementarios* (pp. 9-49, Serie Cuadernos 6). El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Organización Mundial de la Salud. (2020, May 14). *El género y la Covid-19* https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332242/WHO-2019-nCoV-Advocacy_brief-Gender-2020.1-spa.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1
- Orraca, P. (2019). Cross-border earnings of Mexican workers across the US-México border. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 34(3), 451-469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2017.1294025>
- Registran hasta 8 horas de espera en Garita Centro. (2020, August 24). *Adelante Valle*. https://www.ivpressonline.com/adelantevalle/registran-hasta-8-horas-de-espera-en-garita-centro/article_6df9e768-e5d0-11ea-ad6a-7744075b3f85.html
- Rocha, D. & Orraca, P. (2018). Estudiantes de educación superior transfronterizos: residir en México y estudiar en Estados Unidos. *Frontera Norte*, 30(59), 103-128. <https://doi.org/10.17428/rfn.v30i59.880>

- Roldán, M. (1988). Renegotiating the marital contract: Intrahousehold patterns of money allocation and women's subordination among domestic outworkers in Mexico City. In D. Dwyer & J. Bruce (Eds.), *A home divided, women and income in the third world* (pp. 229-247). Stanford University Press.
- Ruíz, M. (2021). Las estadísticas sanitarias y la invisibilidad por sexo y género durante la epidemia de COVID-19. *Gaceta Sanitaria*, 35(1), 95-98. <https://www.gacetasanitaria.org/es-las-estadisticas-sanitarias-invisibilidad-por-articulo-S0213911120300911>
- Sández, A., Niño, L., García, N. & Montoya, G. (2016). Perfil económico y laboral de la transmigración femenina México-Estados Unidos en actividades agrícolas. El caso del Valle Imperial, California. In J. Moreno, C. Valencia & L. Niño (Coords.), *Estudios fronterizos: nuevos escenarios de la migración* (pp. 287-297). UABC/Fundación Konrand Adenauer Stiftung.
- Vargas, E. & Coubès, M. (2017). Working and giving birth in the United States: Changing strategies of transborder life in the North of Mexico. *Frontera Norte*, 29(57). <https://fronteranorte.colef.mx/index.php/fronteranorte/article/view/912/1300>
- Villarreal, M. (2007). La economía desde una perspectiva de género: de omisiones, inexactitudes y preguntas sin responder en el análisis de la pobreza. *La Ventana, revista de estudios de género*, 3(25), 7-42. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1405-94362007000100007
- Villarreal, M. (2017). Violencia de género. Notas para un marco conceptual. In L. Niño, P. González, M. Barajas & S. Figueroa (Coords.), *Estudios de género en el norte de México. En las fronteras de la violencia* (pp. 35-64). UABC. https://www.academia.edu/34933947/ESTUDIOS_DE_G%C3%89NERO_EN_EL_NORTE_DE_M%C3%89XICO_EN_LAS_FRONTERAS_DE_LA_VIOLENCIA
- Villarreal, M., Greene, J. & Niño, L. (2015). *Juggling Currencies in Transborder Contexts: Mexico/us*. Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion-UCI School Social Sciences. <https://www.imtfi.uci.edu/villareal.php>
- Villarreal, M. & Niño, L. (2016). Financial practices on “the Borderlands” (La Línea) in times of crisis. *Human Organization*, 75(2), 151-158. <https://doi.org/10.17730/0018-7259-75.2.151>

Magdalena Villarreal Martínez

Mexican. Doctor cum laude in anthropology from the University of Wageningen, Holland (1994). Professor and senior researcher at CIESAS, Occidente. She is a member of the Mexican Academy of Sciences (AMC) and level III in the National System of Researchers (SNI). She leads the international seminar on the social study of money, economics and finance from an anthropological perspective in coordination with the Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion of the University of California. Research lines: social study of money and finance, poverty, migration and gender. Recent publication: Villarreal, M. & Greene, J. (2020). *Juggling currencies in transborder contexts*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias of Anthropology. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.207>

Lya Margarita Niño Contreras

Mexican. PhD in Social Sciences from the UAS-UABC-CIAD-Unison Program, 2005. Researcher at the Social Research Institute of the Autonomous University of Baja California. Member of the SNI since 2007. Leader of the Academic Body of Social Studies. Research lines: ethnic migration, power and empowerment, as well as women's finances in cross-border contexts. Recent publication: Villarreal, M. & Niño, L. (2020). Una mujer indígena comprometida con la justicia, la igualdad y los derechos de las jornaleras. In R. Rojas, A. González & E. Marúm (Coords.), *Construyendo espacios de igualdad: liderazgos y participación social y política de las mujeres* (pp. 123-138). Universidad de Guadalajara/UNESCO.