

From Latin America/ Mexico

Migrating to survive

Women crabmeat processors from the Mexican state of Tabasco opt to migrate to the US, despite the difficulties they face

Excerpted from a case study prepared by Laura Vidal, Co-ordinator of the St. Thomas Ecological Association of Women, Mexico, for the 'Workshop on Gender and Coastal Fishing Communities in Latin America' organized in June 2000 in Brazil

The migration of Mexican men and women to the US has been documented since the end of the last century, but not for those who come from the Mexican southeast, specifically from the coastal areas of the state of Tabasco. The majority of Tabascan women, who initiated the migration to North Carolina, come from the municipalities of Paraíso and Jalapa de Méndez.

The migration process is linked to the establishment of the company *Mariscos Boca de México* in the Chiltepec municipality of Paraíso. This was set up in 1986 with the objective of exporting fresh and natural crabmeat to the US.

According to the migrant crabmeat processors, the majority of the employees of this company come from Jalpa de Méndez because the women of Chiltepec no longer want to work for the company after it became *gringo*-owned. The people of the Chiltepec community like neither the company nor its owner and they make fun of the women who work there. They call them stinky because of the strong odour of crab that they give off at the end of the workday.

The migration process was initiated in 1989 when 24 female crabmeat processors, who used to work for *Mariscos Boca de México*, decided to go to work in North Carolina, USA. Under authority of the owner of the company, a US agent initiated the process of contracting crabmeat processors to work in American plants.

The first women migrants were highly criticized in the Chiltepec community and people would comment that the women certainly went there to become prostitutes and that they would never return to their

homes. When the migrants returned after the first season and brought money with them, more confidence was generated for the migration in the second year.

From November to March women work in the Chiltepec plant and then migrate to North Carolina for the April to November season. There are five companies in North Carolina that contract the Tabascan women for crabmeat processing—the biggest one contracting up to 150 women. It is estimated that since 1989 some 1,000 Tabascan women have made the journey to work in the crabmeat processing plants of North Carolina. In the US, other crabmeat processing plants, not related to the company, *Boca de México*, exist, where the work environment is less stressful than in the plants where the Tabascan women work.

The hiring process depends upon the requirements of each company. The selection of employees is based on their workplace capability—according to the contract they must be able to process at least 24 pounds daily. At the same time, the person must be able to meet the legal requirements such as birth certificate, passport, and money for the visa. Potential employees must also have the resources to pay the expenses of their travel and stay (food, lodging, and uniform) and must have the recommendation of someone recognized by *Mariscos Boca de México*. Finally, they must promise to be 'well behaved'. The companies commonly provide medical insurance to the crabmeat processors, but they do not take care of the medical or visa expenses, nor do they cover air travel to and from North Carolina.

The majority of women crabmeat processors are married with children. Their schooling barely consists of a few grades of primary education. The women assert that the main reasons that lead them to migrate are: to complement the resources of the family unit, to avoid having their children quit school, economic necessity, and to improve their housing.

Married women comment that the principal problems that arise, given their absence from the home, are: their husband's anger over the abandonment of his children, his infidelity and an increase in his consumption of alcohol. "I don't travel any more because of my children and because my husband, Antonio, doesn't want me to. He would tell me off because his son was arriving

from high school in Aquiles Serdán at 1 am in the morning. In the first year he told me that he wanted me to go, but when I was there he told me that this would be the last year... (Aurelia)". Or "When I returned, my husband was worse because he was always drinking. He would drink for a month and they'd put him in jail... (Antonia)".

Living conditions in North Carolina, vary depending on the employing plant. The conditions of housing and services provided are inadequate and so must be shared collectively, in some cases among large groups. Some migrants rent rooms, but the majority are housed in trailers with rooms where eight to 10 people live. They eat in collective dining rooms where they must stand in long lines to get the food. Their recreation consists of going out in groups supervised by the company. There are also companies that do not let their workers go beyond certain boundaries. "...Up there it's like a prison. You have to line up. There are 140 people waiting to eat. There were only four televisions to watch...(Francisca)". Or "...We would go out on Sunday. They would take us in groups of 15 to 20 people to go shopping... (Virginia)".

It is interesting to note that these conditions simultaneously foster attitudes of solidarity and mutual support as well as of competition and conflict. Frequently, groups are organized in order to alternate tasks like cooking, cleaning of rooms, being around in cases of illness or depression. The usual motives for conflict are related to difficult living conditions—fights over use of bathrooms, cleaning of areas—and the competition related to the different levels of output in piece-work.

Migrant women note that the workdays that go on for so long, as much in the Chiltepec, Tabasco plant as in North Carolina, are exhausting. However, the economic reward is significantly different. In North Carolina the pay is by piece-work and varies between US\$1.28 and US\$1.60 per pound of crabmeat. Some say that they can do up to 60 pounds a day and earn an average of US\$1,000 every two weeks. In Mexico they are paid a monthly salary of 800 pesos, that is to say the equivalent of US\$80. Of course, it must be remembered that working outside one's country requires one to shell out sizeable sums in rent and food (approximately US\$40 and US\$21 a week respectively), cover health expenses, and pay the costs of travel and the accompanying paperwork.

In spite of the difficult working conditions, the majority of migrant women express a preference for working in the US. The economic reasons for this preference are very important, but they are not the only reasons. Women also experience a heightened sense of self-esteem. "...My husband wouldn't take me into consideration. Now, I told him that if he doesn't shape up he can leave, but I'm staying in the US. I achieved my goal in spite of what my husband says... (Chuncha)."

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