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Moms make wrenching choice to work in U.S., leave kids behind

By MARCELA ROJAS
THE JOURNAL NEWS

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Jony Salgero vividly remembers the day his mother left him. It was a Tuesday in 1994 and twilight had fallen on their small town in Guatemala. He was only 6 years old, and he used all his strength to run after the bus that carried her away.

"I tried and tried but I just couldn't catch up," recalled Salgero, now 18. "I didn't understand why she was leaving."

It would be six years before he would see his mother again, when Rosa Salgero, now a waitress who lives in Mahopac, would return to visit her four children. She would bring Jony back to the United States with her, because he was the oldest and able to endure what would be a two-month journey across the border, she said. He lives with her now and works in carpentry, helping his mother with the finances. Jony Salgero said he understands now why she left.

Her three other children were left in the care of their grandmother until she died two years ago. Now, her children — ages 16, 15 and 13 — are left to fend for themselves with the money their mother sends weekly.

"I worry about them every day," said Salgero, 34. "They barely know me. That makes me feel very bad. But I have to take care of them."

Salgero's decision to leave her children in Guatemala while she followed a path to the U.S. for work has never stopped being hard. Yet an increasing number of women from Mexico and Central America are in her position, choosing to leave their sons and daughters in the care of their parents or other relatives to come to the United States for employment and to save their families from devastating poverty. In scholarly circles, they are known as "transnational mothers."

More information on the Web

For more information on transnational mothers, the children of migrants, and related issues, visit these sites

▯ Proyecto El Rincon (The Corner Project): <http://www.elrincon.org/>

▯ The Working Group for Childhood & Migration: <http://globalchild.rutgers.edu/>

▯ Office of Refugee Resettlement: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/

▯ Pew Hispanic Center: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/>

Reporter on webcast

Marcela Rojas discusses this article on the LoHud.com Reports webcast tomorrow at noon on <http://www.lohud.com/>.

On LoHud

Immigrant mothers tell about their sacrifice for the welfare of their children and the hardship of separation in English and Spanish at lohud.com/view

Many are taking up residence in the Lower Hudson Valley, and while they are everywhere, they are nowhere, busily spending most of their time in restaurant kitchens, cleaning houses or caring for the children of others.

Historically, men have been and still represent the majority of people migrating north, but women now are being lured by the prospect of employment. Divorce and fathers who travel to the U.S. and never return, or worse, die, also are contributing to the rise in mothers making the trek.

"Family dissolution does play a part," said Sarah Horton, a medical anthropologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who studied Salvadoran mothers and the emotional impact leaving their children has had on them. "I did find that some women did come because they weren't receiving economic support from men, and they felt there were few options left for supporting their families."

Horton said the shift in migration patterns and the networks women are making abroad also are working to facilitate the increase. Horton is a member of the Working Group on Childhood & Migration, a national body formed last year, made up of about 25 professors and researchers studying the effects of families globally that split to survive economically.

Making the sacrifice

It took Hilda many years to muster the courage to leave her two sons in Nicaragua. She had been granted a tourist visa in the early 1990s, but did not use one until 1999, when she boarded a plane bound for New York with the sole mission to make enough money to put her boys through university. Hilda, who asked that her last name be omitted because of her visa status, loses her breath, and a sense of desperation overcomes her, as she recalls the day she walked away from her children.

"The night before I left, I had a candle lit in my room. My younger son knelt down before it and prayed to God to not let his mother die, with the promise that he would always be a good son," sobbed Hilda, 47. "Rich or poor, a mother loves her child and wants the best for them."

In Nicaragua, Hilda said, she was a biology teacher making \$100 a month. She divorced when her older son was about 7 and assumed full responsibility for both boys, barely ever receiving child support from her ex-husband, she said. She blames years of civil war and political strife for destroying the nuclear family in Nicaragua.

Here, she works as a nanny in Briarcliff Manor, taking care of three children. The work has afforded her the ability to send her sons to the Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria in Managua, where they study engineering and computer technology, and also take English and art classes. They are 21 and 22 years old, and both are expected to finish in 2007.

"I told them that I'm going to be in exile until they graduate," she said.

For her part, watching over children who are not her own while hers are so far away has not been a burden but, rather, a blessing.

"The children here, they fill my world. I try to do the best by them," Hilda said. "My son says to me, 'Mami, take care of those children, give them love, because what you give to them, God gives me here.' "

While theirs could be considered a success story, both mother and sons have paid a high price. Hilda said she had to endure months of therapy before leaving her sons. They, in turn, experienced severe depression and dropped out of school for a while because of the trauma of their mother's leaving and their desire to be near her, she said.

No other choice

Angelica Carrillo never thought she would leave her children without a mother. But when her husband was run over by a car and killed in 1997, she had no other choice, she insisted.

Initially, she did try to stay in her native Morales, Mexico, finding work for the first time in her life cleaning houses and washing people's clothes. But the \$2 she earned a day was not enough to raise four children.

"I could only afford beans and tortillas," said Carrillo, 41. "It was a choice between giving them the basic necessities or giving them nothing."

She crossed the border alone in 1999, emboldened by family already in Yonkers. She quickly found work as a cook in a Mexican restaurant and now lives in Brewster. She works more than 65 hours a week to support her now-teenage children, who live with her aging parents. She sends them \$200 a week.

"Sometimes I worry that they will think that I've abandoned them," she said tearfully. "All I can do is reassure them that I have not."

Carrillo had tried to no avail to get them student visas to come here, she said. She thought she was going to go back this year, but her 18-year-old son, Emanuel Chavez, who arrived late last year, has put those plans on hold for two more years, she said.

The mother and son live in a cramped but tidy studio apartment, and Chavez works at a Dunkin' Donuts. Not only has his presence made her feel closer to home, his computer skills have given her better communication with the family. Her face lights up when she sees her smiling daughters, ages 12 and 14, on a webcam and hears their voices digitally from across the miles.

Chavez said it has been difficult to adapt to life in the U.S., and he misses his friends and family.

"When my mother left, it was very hard because the majority of people don't come back. We prayed, we cried," said Chavez, who was 11 then. "I left to be with her. I don't really know why, I just did."

The children left behind

There are no statistics on the number of mothers arriving, but experts agree they are on the rise and rivaling the men making the trip. There are an estimated 11 million undocumented people living in the U.S., and women now make up 3 million of that figure, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

The mothers who do come, and in some cases the children compelled to follow, are reshaping the family dynamic both here and in Latin America. Authorities examining this phenomenon say it is exacting an enormous emotional toll on both mother and child. The pressure is especially great in Hispanic households, where families are very close-knit.

Typically, mothers say they will return in a couple of years, but sometimes find themselves staying much longer, forming new relationships and having children here. The only source of communication they have with their children back home is weekly phone conversations and photographs through the mail.

"I hear a lot of the heartache from women who have made that sacrifice," said Patricia Perez, Putnam County's director of community affairs. "They come, and after two or three years, they say, 'I don't know if I

should go back. I don't have enough money yet.' Children need their parents more than money or toys being sent in the mail. But I can't judge anyone, because I never had hunger pains or had to see children just eat beans."

Gail Golden, clinical director at Volunteer Counseling Services in Rockland County, said the organization runs two Spanish-speaking mothers' groups, one in Haverstraw and the other in Spring Valley. There are some 30 women in the two groups, and Golden said she has come across some mothers who have left their children in their native countries. The trend is not new, she said, and is common among Caribbean mothers as well.

"It's not an easy adjustment. From the mothers' perspective, they are sacrificing a great deal for their child. So it comes as a shock that their child is angry," Golden said. "We try to affirm that they are making big differences so that the quality of life for their families is elevated. But it is by no means a fun experience for them."

Lolis Montes arrived in the U.S. from Mexico more than two years ago, leaving a 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son and her own business to follow her husband and repair their marriage.

"I just wanted to have the whole family together," said Montes, 25.

But those plans didn't pan out, and they are now getting divorced. Montes lives and works in Suffern at a hair salon. While she does have a boyfriend here, Montes said she plans to return to Veracruz in one year to be with her children, who live with her parents and sister. She is building a house next door to them and has the foundation already laid, she said.

"I know they will always remember me, but I worry that they won't respect me like a mother," she said. "I won't let myself stay too long. I want a good future for them so that I don't have to come back."

Without the support of a mother in the home, children, in many cases, feel abandoned and wind up acting out, dropping out of school or joining gangs, experts say. Some make the dangerous journey across the border alone to be with their parent.

The number of children entering the U.S. illegally also is on the rise, and some reports attribute the increase to family reunification. There is no way to determine how many unaccompanied children enter the country, but last year, immigration officials apprehended 7,787 of them, said Maureen Dunn, director of the

federal Office of Refugee Resettlement's Division of Unaccompanied Children Services. In 2004, 6,200 children were detained.

Dunn said the majority of children the agency sees are boys between the ages of 15 and 17 coming from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, but there is the occasional 5-year-old. There are an estimated 1.7 million undocumented children now living in the U.S., according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Hope on the horizon

The separation of mother and child has caught the attention of organizations that are now trying to tackle this sad situation. Proyecto El Rincon, the Corner Project, is a nonprofit in Malinalco, Mexico, that has offered an educational resource center for children since 1998. The town has a population of 24,000, and studies conducted there in 2004 showed that 10 percent of the children living in the town and 60 percent living in surrounding areas had one or both parents in the U.S.

The Corner Project is forming an initiative to support the children of migrants and their families, and now offers crisis counseling and Internet-based long-distance phone service. It has also recently started an income-generating project for youths to make woodcarved amulets for export. The program is an incentive to keep the children home and employed, said Corner Project Coordinator Ellen Calmus.

"I see enormous hope. These kids are really bright. They have this heroic effort to work hard," Calmus said. "But they are dealing with so much pain, that sometimes they can't."

For Hilda, a single parent on the front lines of this heart-wrenching dilemma, change, she said, must come from the mothers themselves.

"All the mothers that are here fighting for their children must also teach their sons and daughters to be responsible, to put an end to the cycle. To start a new generation of families," she said. "That's all we can do."

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