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María Dolores París-Pombo & Diana Carolina Peláez-Rodríguez^a

^a Diana Carolina Peláez-Rodríguez, Research Assistant at EI, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Calle 114 No. 47A-51, Interior 101, Bogotá, Colombia | +57 1 2145284 | ; Current affiliation: Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Bogotá, Colombia
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Far from Home: Mexican Women Deported from the US to Tijuana, Mexico

María Dolores París-Pombo* and Diana Carolina Peláez-Rodríguez

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study on deported women in Tijuana, Mexico. It describes the experiences and post-deportation emotions of these women and analyzes the role of the shelter as an in-between space amidst the two countries, amidst the loss that deportation represents and the women's potential recovery process, considered as their return home. The paper discusses the emotions related to family separation and the motivations that lead migrants to attempt crossing back into the US. In their efforts to re-enter the country, many of these women put their lives or personal integrity at risk by having to take dangerous and unsafe routes. If they succeed and make it back to their homes, they would live in permanent fear of being arrested and imprisoned, for months or even years, for the "crime" of having returned to the US without authorization.

Introduction

Between 2009 and 2012, the United States (US) government deported nearly 400,000 migrants annually. Between 65 and 75% of the total of deportations carried out each year involve Mexican citizens (Simanski and Sapp 2013). As other studies have shown (Hagan, Castro, and Rodríguez 2010; Deby 2012; Kanstroom 2012) these enforcement policies have fragmented family ties and have caused stress in migrant communities, not only in the US but also in the countries of origin.

In 2012, women accounted for 10.6% of deportations (Simanski and Sapp 2013). Despite being a minority among deportees, the consequences of deportation policies have exerted a particularly negative impact on women, because deportation of men force them to become the sole head of household in the US (Applied Research Center [ARC] 2011; Deby 2012). On the other hand, although the separation from the father causes the formation of single-parent households, it still provides some continuity of the children's care, while separation from the mother usually involves basic changes in the childcare system (Deby 2010, 2012). As some studies have shown (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila 1997; Deby 2010), mothers separated from their children by international borders must rely on kinship networks to build global care chains. Thus, other women—grandmothers, aunts, sisters—provide daily care of their children. Other studies revealed that deportation gives rise to forced and unexpected separation and often leads to a childcare crisis and even household fragmentation or dissolution (ARC 2011; Deby 2012).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the post-deportation experiences of women staying at Instituto Madre Assunta, a shelter for female and child migrants in Tijuana, Mexico. We were particularly interested in understanding the role of the shelter as an in-between space amidst the two countries, the meaning of deportation, the emotions related with family separation, and women's motivations that lead them to attempt crossing back the border into the US. Thus, we raised the following questions: What is the role of the Madre Assunta shelter as a space for socialization and emotional recovery of deported women? What are the experiences and emotions that women at the shelter undergo after their deportation

* María Dolores París-Pombo, Researcher and Full Time Professor, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (EL COLEF), P.O Box L, Chula Vista, CA, 91912-1257, USA | mdparris@colef.mx

Diana Carolina Peláez-Rodríguez, Research Assistant at El, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Calle 114 No. 47A-51, Interior 101, Bogotá, Colombia | +57 1 2145284 | dc.pelaez@uniandes.edu.co; Current affiliation: Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Bogotá, Colombia

from the US.? Is family reunification sufficient motivation for women to re-enter the US despite their fear of detention and incarceration?

The research strategy included immersion in the field through participant observation, as well as semi-structured and in-depth interviews with the deportees. A reading workshop was held each week at the shelter from September 2012 through April 2013. Our aim was to build confidence with both the shelter personnel and the migrant women. Thus, we created a space where women could hear and share stories, generate discussions deriving from their perceptions and opinions on the reading, and pass on their own stories dealing with topics such as friendship, traveling, family, the migratory experience, and the life in the US.

Female deportees who had arrived during the week were invited to share their experiences at the end of the workshop. We were able to conduct 21 semi-structured interviews. The average age of our interviewees was 32 years old and they had spent from 8 to 32 years in the US before being deported. We asked them about the deportation processes, emotions related with family separation and loss of their homes. We also paid attention to the way the deportees perceived Tijuana and the shelter. Finally, we attempted to understand the decisions regarding their migratory trajectories and, in particular, the decision to cross back over the border into the US. These interviews allowed us to understand the role that the shelter plays as an in-between place, where women turn to their family networks or build new friendship ties.

Subsequently, we carried out three in-depth interviews with deported women whom we contacted at the shelter and who had been in Tijuana for several months or years. We inquired about their family history and the gender and intergenerational relations within the household. This enabled us to understand the forms of family integration and disintegration associated with the construction of personal identity and the reasons that led these women to make decisions on their migratory and life trajectories.

Interstitial Spaces on the Northern Mexican Border

Tijuana has been conceived as an urban hybrid space of cultural contradictions, and even as a postmodern laboratory (Montezemolo 2005). It is also a region where various trade, communication, and population flows from the North or the South converge. It is here where a number of myths come into contradiction. The infamous legend that gave rise to the city, with its bars, clubs, and brothels, as a venue of entertainment and permissive behavior, challenges the official and business discourse depicted on large-scale murals and posters that read: "Tijuana Innovadora." It is also a city positioned halfway between tolerance and illegality, teeming with a variety of drug use and dealing sites, where sex trade is openly driven by human trafficking.

Limited on the Northern side of the city by the so-called "La línea" (the line), the border, is a wall composed of three fences: one of corrugated steel, another of high columns, and a third of metal sheets topped with barbed wire. Permanently surveyed by the U.S. Border Patrol (USBP), overflowed by helicopters, and reinforced by powerful lights, the administrative and political boundary between the two countries has become an open wound for border inhabitants (Anzaldúa 1999).

However, this impressive infrastructure has failed to halt the flow. Driven by their strong determination, and sometimes with the aid of expensive smugglers (coyotes), migrants continue to head north. They cross the border with borrowed or rented visas, in automobile trunks, truck shipping containers, improvised watercraft by way of the Pacific Ocean, or on foot through the winding paths of the hilly area east of the city.

When apprehended by the Border Patrol or when deported from their places of residence, migrants are sent to the cities of the northern border of Mexico. There, they usually wait some days to gather resources and information in order to cross back into the US. Some of them stay with friends or relatives or pay for a room at a hotel. Others look for migrant shelters.

These shelters are safer environments than any other alternative in the city, impermanent oases where migratory flows momentarily come to a stop (O'Leary 2009, 528). On their deportation to Mexico, these women are temporarily trapped between the American metropolis and the Mexican periphery, between their home in the US and their Mexican origins.

The shelter Instituto Madre Assunta in Tijuana, receives women and the children accompanying them. Once at the shelter, the women receive some soup, a toothbrush, clothes, and slippers. They also have three free meals a day, legal counseling, a medical check-up, and assistance for their settlement in Mexico (National I.D. issuing, job seeking, family contacting, among others). Although the maximum stay is two weeks, they could ask for an extension of two more when the case requires it.

For these women, Madre Assunta is that stable ground where they can reflect on the decisions they need to make. The shelter provides them with an intermediate state between the overall loss that deportation implies and the potential recovery process, viewed as their return home. In this sense, these shelters are transient places that allow for transition periods between home and the rest of the world (O'Leary 2009).

The experience of the deportee, like that of the migrant, is one of liminality: the person is caught between the nationalist atavism and postcolonial metropolitan assimilation (Bhabha 1994, 224). Unable to reintegrate into their origins (Mexico) and facing the improbability of being able to translate their deportation experience into repatriation ("a return to the homeland"), deported women find themselves at a crossroads. They must make crucial decisions regarding their migratory trajectories in a matter of days.

The women who remain in Tijuana or in other border cities face very limited job opportunities: the majority of them do not have identity documents in Mexico, just as in the US, and the procedures to obtain them may take over three months. Also, they usually do not have proof of a labor record or academic background. Therefore, their chances of entering into the formal labor market in Mexico are minimal. The most common source of employment is in the informal market or domestic work: persons wishing to hire their services by the day or by the hour do so directly through the shelter. For women with a certain educational level who speak good English, call centers could be an employment opportunity, which does not generally require previous labor experience.

Expelled from the place they grew up in, dragged out from their family and social networks, when these women arrive in Mexico, they are often stigmatized as criminals by local authorities and the border population, and eventually forced to cross back into what a long-time-ago-ceased-to-be the American Dream. In this transitional state with no clear destination, circularity becomes a permanent search for home.

A Place to Stay

And there at the border they told me of this shelter. I entered [the city] with a friend I met in jail and we looked for it. I knew they would take us in there, they would give us a roof over our heads and a place to stay. Judith

Each day, the Madre Assunta shelter welcomes women from all over Mexico, and some from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, who plan to cross the US border for either the first or the tenth time. Also, women who voluntarily returned to Mexico and deported women from the US arrive at the shelter. Some have spent most of their lives in the US, others only a few months. The shelter provides a place where they can assess their next move and overcome the emotional burden of their removal from the US. In short, the shelter is a space-time location that allows these women to reflect on the decisions they must make, a place where new social networks are formed and where they undergo personal transformations.

During the initial moments after deportation, some women idealize their arrival into Mexico and experience feelings of freedom. Those who used drugs or spent years in prison dream of a renewal, a new direction of rewriting their history. This is the way Elba, who was taken to the US by her mother at the age

of two years and who speaks no Spanish, expressed her excitement about the change. She had just been released from prison, where she had spent a year for drug possession. She identifies deportation as an opportunity to start over:

I want to take this for what it is. Just take advantage of the opportunity, and get to know myself, this big part of me ... 'cause when I was growing up I never hung around with Latin people. At first I was hanging out with black people. I really wanna embrace my culture! Know the Mexican people, I know Hispanic people are very beautiful, so I'm just gonna stay here and maybe who knows, I might not even wanna go back! But for now I'm just going to do my best! [...] I don't wanna be a financial burden! So I wanna get a job before anything so I could support myself out here and I do wanna see if I could go back to school! I still wanna make my dreams come true. (Elba, 25; interviewed in English, October 24, 2012)

Emotions and personal projects can change very quickly after deportation. These are uncertain times when each decision may impact one's life trajectory and family cycle. Women who grew up in the US sometimes dream of returning to their home communities to find their roots; for example, Denisse, who spent five years in prison where her son was born, experiences mixed feelings with regard to returning to the Mexican state of Aguascalientes, where she was born and where her grandparents still live, or crossing back into the US to meet up with her family:

My first thought when I got here was to leave for Aguascalientes the following day so I could at least know my hometown. If I should die, I would at least have visited there. I tried to persuade myself and say, "Yes I will go!" Yesterday when I wanted to go to Aguascalientes, I thought: "I'll take the bus today and go!" And today I got up and felt very sad, I don't want to [go]! I don't want to go there! I want to give myself the chance [to cross back]. I want to cross back this weekend! (Denisse, 24; interviewed on October 17, 2012)

Like many deportees, Denisse has no contact with her family in Mexico and knows no one here. Her mother took her to the US when she was only a few months old and lived in Los Angeles all her life. She wears shorts, basketball high tops, an oversized hoodie, and has tattoos on her legs. She feels very awkward in Tijuana and desperately attempts to adapt to her new environment:

The next day I went out, I was afraid, very afraid, because the way I dress and my tattoos ... I look very different from the life style here. And I was afraid of what might happen to me, so I didn't want to go out. But when I decided to go out, I realized that things were not as bad as I thought. And I started to feel a little better, and I tried and tried, but still don't feel quite right. I don't like it! At all! (...) It's not nice, I don't like it! I don't like the dirt, it's so dirty. I'm not used to living like this. With so many people and all that. I've always been a person who keeps to myself, I like to have my own room. It's not the same! It will never be the same. Especially when your parents took you to the US and you lived there for the past 24 years. I never entered [in Mexico], and I never, never came back. I basically feel American. (Denisse, 24; interviewed on October 17, 2012)

Denisse perceives deportation as an alienating experience. She has been exiled from the only place she knows—the streets of Los Angeles—and is unable to identify with this new urban destination. In Northern Mexican border cities, there is a stigmatization towards deportees, which is transmitted through the media and in the official discourse of authorities and the police. They constantly warn against the dangers that deportees pose to public safety, depict them as dangerous criminals, and blame them for gang violence (Padilla 2012). Paradoxically, deportees themselves arrive in Mexico deeply concerned about the

rates of violence in the country. The only news they have of Tijuana is from US reports, which portray Mexico as a land ravaged by crime and feuded over by dominant drug cartels.

The sense of risk leads women to develop strategies, such as always having someone accompanying them when they go out. Relationships of trust established at the shelter extend beyond it with the creation of new social networks. As the days pass, the women forge bonds of friendship and camaraderie and form groups according to age or affinities. New relationships may begin with a conversation in the TV room or bedroom and are consolidated outside the shelter when women go out in pairs or groups around the neighborhood or downtown to find work, exchange money, or buy basic items. Thus, together they consider short-term projects such as crossing the US border, finding jobs, or renting a room in Tijuana.

Family separation is experienced as “being in two places:” desperate to remain in the lives of their children or their partners, deported women actively attempt to remain in touch through the Internet or calls on cell phones. Despite the fact of being far away and separated by the border, they make great efforts to preserve their role in their household. They affirm control and care of their children by holding lengthy conversations with the other women looking after their children to ensure that their children’s routines are not affected. For instance, Olga has seven children who were born in the US. On being deported, she left them in the care of her mother and sisters. She is particularly concerned about her youngest daughter, Viviana, who continues to require a great deal of attention:

I call my mom every morning, every morning and every afternoon, and talk to my 3-year-old baby girl, because she is the youngest. The other children are older. She’s always asking for me. I always remind her: you know? “She has a dentist appointment today.” Or I say: “Mom, she needs her vaccines”, and I talk to her or ... things like that. Having her grandma is not the same as having her mom. It’s different because she doesn’t know what she likes, right? And I always have to say, “Mom: Viviana likes to drink her milk at such and such a time. Or she likes to eat ... ” certain things that I know she likes and they don’t know. My brothers and sisters also help my mom so I talk to them, too. (Olga, 35, interviewed on November 27, 2012)

In the computer room, the women sign up to reserve time to chat, be on Facebook, and talk to their children, partners, or parents on Skype.

Symbolic Displacement and Long-Distance Mothering

Women in the shelter in Tijuana occupy a physical space but continue to feel that they belong to the social space they constructed in the US throughout their lives. This shift is what Salazar (2001) denominates, in the case of Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles, “symbolic dislocation.” Salazar defines dislocations as “the challenges that Filipina domestic workers encounter as they navigate through the social process of migration. They are the segmentations embodying their daily practices in migration and settlement” (Salazar 2001, 197).

Deported women face similar situations when they are removed to a place that they are not acquainted or identify with that is far from their children or other relatives. When analyzing feelings associated with transnational motherhood, Kittay (2013) considers that the body of the children represents a place that is somehow understood as the here by the caregiver: “It is the bodily here for the caregiver qua caregiver” (Kittay 2013, 208). From the expressions that migrant women use, Kittay suggests that despite being in a new country, these women continue to remain in their place of origin:

it is the body of the cared for that situates the caregiver in a here, then she locates her here through that other body. A migrant mother whose here is the body of her children—ones who live in the place that she leaves—leaves her here in the sense of

the “here of [her] body proper” as well as in the sense of “here in part” (Kittay 2013, 209).

Deported women were not only displaced across borders, but were also forced to leave a familiar place that they considered home. Given that identity is relational, well-being is associated with the meaningful relationships formed throughout one’s life. The damage done to a mother forced to leave her children results in a brutal rupture of significant bonds.

Each woman at the shelter has unique stories of parenting, border crossing, migration, and deportation. However, the women share a symbolic structure that supplies with meaning their female experience. Throughout their lives, they have constructed themselves in multiple dimensions by engaging in various discourses and practices concerning femininity.

Motherhood is undoubtedly a mainstay in these discourses. In all representations and cultural practices related with motherhood, the hegemonic conception suggesting that motherhood should be exercised through a physical presence prevails, although it can be shared with other female relatives (D’Aubeterre 2002). In these cases, women are valued for their role as caregivers of their husbands, children, and other persons; through them, they define their existence as beings-for-others (Lagarde 1993). Deportation implies forcible separation; it fractures this bond, generating crucial ruptures in the identification process and creating profound feelings of grief:

I feel terrible. Terrible because it changes your life overnight. Because there [in the U.S.] I had a house, even though I was not near my family, but I knew they were there and I could see them. Because I could see my children, because I had a job. And horrible because you don’t know anyone here. You don’t even know the names of the streets. How are you going to start over? ... Because I can’t see them, because I don’t know what will happen to my children, I want them home with me. Why did this happen to me? From one day to the next, just like that. (Judith, 25; interviewed on October 24, 2012)

The fact that women not only harbor life in their bodies but also nourish their children through them, engages an association that binds life and its sustenance together as a “natural” duty:

Well, I was so happy [upon having her baby], I wanted to do everything for him ... and I remember that I always, I mean, at that age, I was 17 and I gave him ... gave him my full attention. Because before I used to go out and everything ... And I thought to myself: Oh ... My baby is due soon, and I had him, as a mother. My mom used to say that I looked after him well ... I’d take him to his medical appointments, feed and dress him well, and then I’d help my mother-in-law clean house, cook and do everything for him [...] but ... I mean, my life changed since, I no longer could ... How do you say it? I wouldn’t be able to finish school anymore, or anything ... I mean, that’s how I felt ... I don’t know why I felt that way, like I couldn’t do things anymore because he was there already, my son. (Olga, 35, interviewed on November 27, 2012.)

Olga, a mother of seven, was taken across the US border by her mother when she was three and grew up in California. At the time of her deportation, she had a two-month-old baby. She expressed her constant anxiety about being away from her small children who needed her and about not knowing how or when she would see them again.

When Mexican women migrate to the US, they do not only cross geographical boundaries, but also the symbolic ones, which shape them as women within their context. The feeling of not being able to fulfill partially or completely the expectations of the feminine role could be described as guilt. However,

remittances act as a strategic element that aid in negotiating the conflicts and contradictions arising from this dislocation (Asakura 2012, 730).

Nonetheless, deported mothers are unable to re-signify caregiving with this strategy. They even often receive remittances from their relatives remaining in the US. The idea of the “moral economy” (Contreras and Griffith 2012, 52) that supports reasons for migration loses its meaning; it collapses as a result of deportation, and living a transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila 1997) becomes meaningless. Women deportees understand that they must pull themselves together into a state of “normality,” and the need to be physically present in their most intimate relationships provides the possibilities to alleviate such lack of meaning: either they cross back over the border or send for their children to be with them in Mexico.

In extreme cases, some female deportees feel paralyzed, unable to make decisions about their future or even about leaving the shelter. This is the case of Aurora who has spent two years in Tijuana, mostly at the Madre Assunta shelter. After several unsuccessful attempts to bring back her three children to Mexico, she went into a deep depression. Native to a village in Veracruz, Aurora has not yet plucked up the courage to talk to her mother and other relatives who still live in this village. She feels she cannot go back to her hometown without her children or explain her failure. When she lost her role as a migrant provider (by no longer sending remittances back to her village) together with her role as a mother, she lost the very meaning of her existence:

So no, I don't like this because ... because of my children, because I have the kids and think to myself: “No, I have to feel well, I have to be well and I will see my children one day and we'll be fine.” Because you have a life, you have your life and do your stuff, I'd go to work and after work I'd get back and see my children ... in other words, that is your life and all of a sudden ... boom! ... Everything changed. It was a shocking experience for me and a hard one to accept ... I still remember it sometimes and my mind still can't digest it. (Aurora, 39; interviewed on November 21, 2012)

Dangerous Crossings

When migrants are deported from the US, they do not only have to forcibly return to their countries of origin, but are barred from reentry from 5 years to life, depending on the cause for deportation (Hagan, Castro, and Rodriguez 2010; Kanstroom 2012, 144). Even after waiting for the time stipulated by the judge, the majority of deportees know that their chances of qualifying for a visa are slim. Re-entering the US without authorization is seen as a crime and is punishable by up to ten years in prison. However, emotional and financial difficulties often lead many of them to cross back over the border into the US without authorization.

Since the 1990s, the US government has intensified surveillance on the traditional crossing areas, forcing migrants to follow increasingly longer and more dangerous routes to reach “the other side” (Eschbach et al. 1999). Sometimes, in order to go around the long wall that now divides both countries, migrants have to walk for more than two days through desert and mountainous areas, where they are frequently assaulted.

The majority of our interviewees (17 of the 21 women) expressed their intentions to reenter the US. Those who lived in the US for several years sometimes have sisters or cousins who can “lend” them a visa or US passport for crossing the US border. Three of our interviewees did so in this way. Others hired a coyote, or sought the help of a relative. Two of the women embarked on their own journey on foot, through the border between Tecate and Mexicali. The area encompasses the steep, rugged La Rumorosa Mountains and the Imperial Desert. Each year, dozens of migrants die in this desert, mainly during the summer months when temperatures can soar to 45°C (Jiménez 2009).

Undocumented border crossings can be very difficult and extremely perilous. Indeed, the vast infrastructure of US border enforcement has obliged migrants to employ much more circuitous and dangerous routes. Sometimes, in order to circle the border fence, migrants need to walk for days through mountainous or arid terrain. They endure extreme temperatures, are exposed to the bites of poisonous animals, and sometimes have to go without food or water during their journey. If they are hidden in vehicles to cross the US border, they risk suffocation. On the Mexican side of the border, they are exposed to widespread violence due to rising crime rates. When she was first deported in 2010, Judith made several attempts to cross back over the border:

Well, this way here, the first time I tried to cross through Altar, Sonora, I am sure that we were protected by the grace of God, because the desert is very tough, there are lots of stones. I wasn't as heavy as I am now, but there were people who stayed behind on the road, who could not make it to the top. Then migration [the Border Patrol] shows up when you're on the hill, they don't just turn up: they show up with weapons, with guns. You don't know if they will kill you right there or hold you up at gunpoint, or even who they are, until they identify themselves. And it is the same through Tijuana, we crossed but as soon as we did we were robbed. (Judith, 25; interviewed on October 24, 2012.)

Those who try to cross the US border through Tijuana with the help of coyotes are held at safe houses for days or weeks, awaiting a sufficiently large number of migrants to arrive or the ideal time to cross; thus, women run the risk of being raped or abducted. In Tijuana, coyotes tend to collect their fees when the migrant reaches their destination. In order to prevent migrants from continuing with another guide, the coyotes keep the migrants locked up in conditions resembling a kidnapping. This often provides the coyotes with the opportunity to blackmail the migrants' relatives in the US (Ginsburg 2010). The vulnerability caused by the desperation of crossing back also affords coyotes the opportunity to take advantage of migrants by stealing from them.

When arrested by the Border Patrol, female deportees can be immediately sent back to Mexico by means of what the US government terms "voluntary return." These women can also be held for a few days or even weeks at a detention center before being deported. Last, the Border Patrol can arrest them and accuse them of "returning after having been deported."

Should the women be successful in crossing the US border and in reaching their homes in the US, they live in constant fear of arrest and imprisonment. Thus, returning drives them into marginalization. In the words of Dingeman-Cerda and Bibler Coutin (2012, 115), a subclass of immigrants is created, people who are socially vulnerable and without the possibility of regularization. However, deciding to stay in Mexico means that they are willing to start their lives over from scratch and relinquish seeing their children grow up. For mothers with a chance of bringing their children to Mexico, this means depriving them of the opportunity to study and to access material comforts.

For example, Rosaura lived in the US for nine years before deportation, and her three children, who were born there, remained in Santa Rosa, California, with their grandparents. Rosaura asked her parents to send her children to her to Mexico; they all went to Morelia (Michoacán), where Rosaura has relatives, but the children failed to adapt. She has made five unsuccessful attempts to re-enter the US. The last time she tried to cross back, she was detained for three weeks:

People tell me that I might be put in jail for a month or so, but ... it's worth the try. I have to keep trying because of my kids, because they don't want to be here in Michoacán. The oldest of the three says he doesn't like it [Michoacán], that it is not a nice place and he doesn't like it. All three go to school there [the U.S.] and are learning and do not want to return [to Mexico]. And they tell me: "Why don't you come over here instead? We don't want to go back." And they are very young. My

daughter is three years old and doesn't want to come back. She says: "I don't want to go over there." And yes, it's hard but ... I will try again. (Rosaura, 32; interviewed on September 5, 2012)

For Patricia, who has lived in the US all her life, crossing back over the US border simply means "going back home." Her ten children were born in the US and all of them stayed behind after her deportation. She was deported because she used false identity documents and had failed to pay two fines. Although she could have fought her case in court, she was afraid she would have to spend months or even years at the detention center during the trial proceedings; thus, she agreed to be deported. After her deportation to Mexico, she attempted to cross back without documents via a route East of Tijuana. When asked whether she had hired a guide or coyote, Patricia replied:

No! Just me! I'm going home! I walked home! I don't need none of this other stuff! I'm trying to get home, my home is over there. My home is not here. I'm here because I have to be here, but not because it's my home. So I went back and they catch me, right? And they said: Weren't you just deported? So they take me back after 20 days. So, the same old situation. (Patricia, 35; interviewed in English on October 10, 2012)

Although she is fully aware of the risk of imprisonment, Patricia is willing to attempt crossing back again as many times as necessary to go home, because she cannot possibly consider any other destination. Her son is attempting to arrange for her return to the US with borrowed documents and Patricia herself considered attempting to cross the US border on foot through Tecate.

Fearing to attempt a return to the US and be arrested by immigration authorities, some deported women do their best to adjust and settle in Tijuana, hoping that their relatives will come to visit them. However, loneliness can be hard to cope with and visits are usually much scarcer than expected.

This was the case of Viviana, who was deported after being accused of "domestic violence" for having a fight with her boyfriend. She lived most of her life in the US, where she was taken by her parents when she was just three years old. Her three sisters were born in the US. When she arrived at the shelter in Tijuana after deportation, she made arrangements with two other women to rent a room together and got a job at a call center. However, she soon had problems with her two companions, because they used drugs, partied all night, and invited men to the room. She also began to feel very lonely as a result of being away from all her relatives. Due to all of this, she changed her mind and returned to the shelter to attempt crossing the border again to be with her family:

I'm going to try to cross again because the short time I was here [in Tijuana] I felt very lonely, because I have no family here. I go to work and come back and so on ... it's like ... well ... what kind of a life is that, right? You work, come home, sleep and wake up and have no one to talk to: Hello? How are you? ... And living alone started to make me feel very sad and depressed and I tell him [her partner]: I don't want to be here, because of all the things that are happening to me ... I'm scared to stay here alone much longer! (Viviana, 23, interviewed on November 7, 2012)

Although Viviana made it back safely to Los Angeles, her projects have dwindled: before deportation, she was studying psychology and sociology at a university. Because she had not one small fault in her personal or school life, Viviana was an ideal candidate for protection from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Currently, however, Viviana works and lives in hiding, in permanent fear of being detained and imprisoned.

Conclusions

Deportation exposes to view a complex web of power relations that extend beyond borders and national sovereignty. Female deportation does not only affect the woman forced to return to the country of origin, but also her family. It displaces the individual in time and space, obstructing the identification process and putting women in difficulty to reconstruct themselves, especially those who are mothers. Deported women have to put their daily lives, habits, and relationships on hold and they must adopt a survival mode involving the challenge of recreating some degree of normality for themselves and their families.

Hegemonic notions of femininity exert an influence on post-deportation emotions. The mothers interviewed claim that proximity is essential in child-rearing to ensure good care and education. With the border between them and their children and without the opportunity to provide for them, they experience a strong sense of guilt associated with the feeling of abandonment. Therefore, the sole solution that they find to undo the harm is to be present again in the lives of their children, regardless of the risks this entails.

For all women, deportation denotes an overwhelming loss of resources, places, and loved ones. However, each of these women find different ways of responding to their loss: while some made quick decisions about their migration trajectory, others encountered a type of anxiety and depression that rendered it impossible for them to reintegrate back into Mexico or to reenter the US.

Women who grew up in the US, particularly those who are mothers, have the greatest sense of urgency to “go back home.” They express feelings of alienation and do not perceive their removal to Mexico as a “return,” but rather as banishment. Indeed, these women were unable to say goodbye to family or friends, were forced out of a place they called home, and arrived in an unknown country; some do not even speak Spanish. However, while exiles can reconstruct themselves as a group through the nostalgic reproduction of national identity, deportation denies the very sense of collective consciousness, destroys networks and family relationships, and removes individuals from their everyday environment without reinstating their sense of belonging.

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