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"Women's Lives, Migrant Communities: A Study of Mexico-US Migration 1940-2009"
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Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report

Support from the Women, Religion and Globalization Project allowed me to conduct archival research at Stanford University and ethnographic research in the Napa Valley during the summer of 2009 for my dissertation on Mexican undocumented migration. I examined how migration has changed the ways in which Mexican women were incorporated into local, national, and transnational communities. Because of its prominence in migrants' lives, religion was the key angle from which I explored this topic.

The ethnographic work I conducted pointed to the ways in which women who migrate to the United States were the ones who helped to maintain Catholic religious practices. Ricardo Ramirez, for instance, remembers: "when I first migrated to the United States I was hanging out only with other guys…Religion was not in our mind, that's not what we were thinking about. In our free time we would go to bars." After three years in the United States, however, Ramirez returned to his hometown in Mexico married Teresa Mendón and returned to the U.S. with her. Mendón encouraged the family to attend Church every Sunday. Ramirez now reports "feeling extremely content with" his "attachment to God."

The women I interviewed agreed that they were the religious bedrocks of their communities. They explained this in two main ways. First, many told me that they were terrified that their husband would cheat on them with another woman even though they had migrated to the United States to be with him. Beatriz Calderon who followed her husband to the U.S. explains: "I need to make sure he remembers what God wants. If he cheats on me I have no one else here in this country." She tells the story of a friend of hers whose husband abandoned her for another woman leaving her not only emotionally, but also financially devastated. Most of the other women I interviewed, including Mendón, agreed with Calderon's assessment. Second, many women explained that attaching themselves to religion made them feel more "at home" and eliminated some of the sense of dislocation migration produced. After all, women are in charge of religious practices back in Mexico. When in the unfamiliar and alienating environment of the United States, many women decided to attach themselves even tighter to these familiar practices.

At the Stanford archives I analyzed how Mexican American organizations (in particular the Centro Autnomo de Accion Social, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and those of the National Council of La Raza) used gendered religious discourses in their efforts to change U.S. immigration laws. I had hypothesized hat they would use this type of language because activists from the United Farm Workers (UFW) had often used religious imagery of women to fight for their cause—more prominently the image of *La Virgen de Gudadalupe*. UFW activists often portrayed themselves as followers of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and their enemies as having deviant

sexual and gender personas. However, my research showed that this type of imagery was not utilized when fighting for immigration reform.

While scholars often point to religion as a "traditional" force that helps to restrain women, women themselves often consider religion to be liberationist. Their attachment to the Catholic Church provides them with a means to acquire control after the sense of dislocation produced by migration as well as to restrain their husband's sexuality (and in turn income). I am very grateful to the support from the Women, Religion, and Globalization Project that allowed me to carry out this research and start to understand these processes.