

The COVID-19 Pandemic, the Crisis of Care, and Mexican Immigrants in the United States: A Preliminary Analysis

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In the transition from Fordist to flexible accumulation in the last decades of the twentieth century, social reproduction was externalized onto families and communities. In the United States, this “crisis of care” was mitigated by the incorporation of illegalized Mexican immigrants’ low-cost reproductive labor in private and public services. From a feminist perspective on social reproduction and migration, we argue that the impacts of the COVID-19 economic crisis on Mexican immigrant communities were related to the specific ways that immigrants’ labor was incorporated into the circuits of social reproduction. Drawing on interviews with migrants from rural central Mexico in the United States, we analyze how immigrants absorbed the worst effects of the crisis by cheapening their labor, transferring unpaid reproductive labor to other household members, and engaging in informalized activities. Anti-immigrant policies exacerbated the precarious situations of undocumented immigrants and mixed-status Mexican families during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis of care, feminization of migration, flexible accumulation, immigrants, Mexico, social reproduction, United States.

En la transición del fordismo a la acumulación flexible en las últimas décadas del siglo XX, la reproducción social fue externalizada a las familias y las comunidades. En los Estados Unidos, esta “crisis de cuidados” fue mitigada mediante la incorporación de fuerza de trabajo ilegalizada y de bajo costo de los inmigrantes mexicanos en los servicios públicos y privados. Desde una

perspectiva feminista de la reproducción social y la migración, argumentamos que los impactos de la crisis económica del COVID-19 en las comunidades de inmigrantes mexicanos estuvieron mediados por la manera en que la fuerza laboral inmigrante fue incorporada en los circuitos de reproducción social. Utilizando entrevistas con migrantes del centro de México establecidos en Estados Unidos, analizamos cómo los inmigrantes absorbieron los peores efectos de la crisis abaratando su mano de obra, delegando trabajo reproductivo a otros miembros del hogar y emprendiendo actividades económicas informales. Las políticas antinmigrantes exacerbaron la precariedad de las familias mexicanas indocumentadas y de estatus mixto durante la pandemia.

Palabras clave: acumulación flexible, COVID-19, crisis de cuidados, Estados Unidos, feminización de la migración, inmigrantes, México, reproducción social.

My claim . . . is that *every* form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated *social-reproductive* “crisis tendency” or “contradiction.” On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.

—Fraser 2017, 22 (emphasis in the original)

Introduction

The health and economic crisis unleashed by the spread of COVID-19 around the world had significant impacts on immigrant communities.¹ In this article, we aim to understand how this crisis affected Mexican immigrant populations on the East Coast of the United States. We undertake this analysis to reveal how the hardships experienced by immigrants are not only a reflection of the general crisis that affected many workers but are also related to the specific ways that immigrants’ employment sustains the circuits of social reproduction. Through a feminist perspective on social reproduction and migration, we argue that the impact of the COVID-19 economic crisis on immigrants cannot be fully understood without grasping how Mexican immigrants have come to play a central role in mitigating

1. The authors thank the Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as who shared their experiences with us during these very difficult times. We are indebted to their generosity of spirit and grateful for the trust they placed in us. We would also like to thank Christian Zlorniski and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All errors are our own.

the “crisis of care” (Fraser 2017) in the United States over the last three decades.

The Great Recession’s (2007–9) impact on Mexican immigrants forms the departure point for the present analysis. This last crisis, along with increased border enforcement, massive deportations, and changes to labor markets, led to significant changes in migratory flows between Mexico and the United States (Levine 2015; Massey 2012; Villarreal 2014). After decades of accelerated growth, Mexican migration to the United States declined, and return migration increased, resulting in a “below net-zero” migration pattern (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012; Passel and Cohn 2019). Beyond these macro changes, however, it became clear that the Great Recession’s impact on immigrants was uneven, given the differential effects of the crisis on the labor markets in which they were concentrated. The pattern of labor-market insertion was itself the result of the feminization of migration and changes in the organization of social reproduction in the previous decades (D’Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020).

These insights inform our preliminary analysis of the COVID-19 economic crisis, whose impact on society—and on the Mexican immigrants whom we have followed for more than a decade—has been very different than that of the Great Recession. Due to the social-distancing measures implemented in 2020 to stem the spread of the coronavirus, workers in service sectors were severely impacted. We believe that the differential impacts on immigrants during these two economic crises must be understood in the historical context of how immigrants have played a key role in social reproduction in the United States. The fact that a significant portion of reproductive labor is illegalized and racialized underscores the precarious foundation of the social-reproductive circuits that sustain life. The COVID-19 health and economic crises disrupted the already precarious circuits of social reproduction, causing major problems for immigrants employed in these sectors. This revealed, simultaneously, immigrants’ vulnerability and capital’s dependence upon them. It was also evidence of how capital accumulation undermines the processes upon which it depends, as alluded to in the epigraph of this article.

To develop our argument, our paper is divided into five sections. First, we provide a brief overview of our fieldwork in central Mexico and on the US East Coast. Next, we present our analytical framework that explains the historical context of migration crucial to understanding the impacts of crisis—first, the Great Recession and, later, COVID-19—on migrant communities. Third, we discuss how COVID-19 disrupted immigrant employment in New York City and Durham,

North Carolina, in the spring and summer of 2020, the first peak of the pandemic on the US East Coast. In the fourth section, we describe the disruptions to the circuits of social reproduction during COVID-19 and some of the ways immigrants attempted to survive the COVID-19 crisis. We argue that this revealed the fragility of capital's attempts to mitigate the crisis of care with illegalized immigrant labor. In the conclusions, we consider the different impacts of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis on immigrants in order to deepen our understanding of the connections among the feminization of migration and the social-reproductive crisis in the United States.

Research Methods

The analysis we present in this paper is based on long-term ethnographic research in two rural towns in the central Mexican state of Puebla: Pahuatlán de Valle in the Sierra Norte and Zapotitlán Salinas in the Mixtec region. Surveys, interviews, and participant observation conducted in the towns in the 2000s examining the emergence of migration and its impact on different dimensions of daily life were used to construct a more systematic comparison of the Great Recession's impacts in Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán beginning in 2010.² We applied a modified version of the Mexican Migration Project's Ethnosurvey to households in Pahuatlán (20% sample) and Zapotitlán (25% sample), conducted interviews among return migrants, and followed sixteen households for eighteen months in each town to register how they were impacted by and how they adapted to the Great Recession. Shorter periods of fieldwork were carried out in Durham, North Carolina (2013, 2014), and New York City (2014), the principle destination of Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as respectively. To understand the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on immigrants in the United States, we used data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for Durham and New York City, and phone interviews with a nonrepresentative sample of contacts in Durham and New York City conducted during the summers of 2020 and 2021.

Migration from Central Mexico to the US East Coast and the Feminization of Migration

Rapidly accelerating migratory flows to the East Coast of the United States emerged in Pahuatlán de Valle and Zapotitlán Salinas in the

2. Fieldwork from 2010 to 2013 was supported by the Mexican National Science and Technology Council (CONACYT) under grant CV-22008-01-001022222.

late 1980s and early 1990s (D'Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020). The growth of these flows mirrored national trends: in the 1990s, migration increased ten times compared with the preceding decades (Arroyo-Alejandro, Berumen-Sandoval, and Rodríguez-Álvarez 2010; BBVA Bancomer and CONAPO 2014), fueled by the proliferation of migratory flows originating in central and southern Mexico (Binford 2004; Garrido 2004; Mestries 2013; Rus and Rus 2014). Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán experienced the loss of viability of productive activities and a rapid transition to a service economy. Like many towns in the region, the expulsion forces of the neoliberal agenda were imposed over the historical forces that had retained these populations in Mexico.

These new migratory flows from Mexico emerged in the context of the progressive orientation of the country's economy toward the exterior, under the pressure of austerity dictated by the International Monetary Fund to alleviate the weight of debt. Under this imperative during the last third of the previous century, successive neoliberal governments in Mexico promoted the country's opening to foreign capital through the adoption of generous fiscal policies and the deregulation of financial flows and labor markets. The elimination of tariffs on imported equipment and consumer goods (especially corn) and the increased state support of agricultural export enclaves (fruit, flowers, vegetables) represented a significant blow to small and medium producers unable to transform their production to adapt to the new global agricultural order (Fitting 2011; Rubio 2008). The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 was a critical moment in the process of the neoliberalization of rural Mexico initiated in the 1970 (Appendini 2001; Binford 2004; Otero 2011). With cuts to social expenditures and the privatization of strategic state enterprises, the transfer of resources to households was reduced, dismantling the already weak social protections for subsistence producers, artisans, and small rural industries in the form of subsidies. The fall of real wages, the loss of urban jobs in central Mexico filled by workers from rural areas (Escobar Latapí 1993; Otero 2011), and the devaluation of the peso in 1994 sealed the economic debacle at the end of the last century.

These transformations in the rural sector resulted in specific changes in Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán. In 1990, almost 60% of the population of Pahuatlán was concentrated in the primary sector; in 2010, this percentage fell to 41%. Between 1960 and 1970, 70% of the municipality's population was concentrated in family-based coffee production with seasonal employment as agricultural workers or in

the production of basic grains. In 2010, only 42% was involved in this sector (INEGI 1990, 2010; Secretaria de Industria y Comercio 1963, 1973). Without social protections, producers could not contend with the fluctuations in prices, unpaid debts, maintenance of fields, and the economic fallout from crop losses. Remittances from Durham, combined with the income generated in the service sector (small stores or handicraft shops, unstable and poorly paid jobs in restaurants serving local tourists), mitigated, to some extent, the pernicious effects of the disarticulation of agriculture.

In Zapotitlán, subsistence agriculture declined in the 1960s when the town was integrated into a regional travertine and marble extraction and processing industry. By the late 1980s, a steady flow of men and a few women left Zapotitlán for New York City, joining migratory flows established more than a decade earlier from the Mixtec region of the state. The devaluation of the peso in 1994, sharp reductions in electricity subsidies, and the depletion of local rock deposits devastated the local industry. As a result, international migration to New York City accelerated. Remittances became a crucial pillar of subsistence for hundreds of households in Zapotitlán, replacing the income earned from local onyx quarries and the onyx workshops. For the population that remained in the town, the growing local-tourism sector provided important, if low-waged, employment, illustrated by the 20% increase in the tertiary sector from 1990 to 2010 (INEGI 1990, 2000, 2010).

The neoliberalization of rural Mexico and the precipitous growth of Mexican migration to the United States are two faces of a privileged path by which transnational capital incorporated populations with “no productive function,” “latent reserves,” and residual surplus populations (Smith 2011) from regions of small-scale, subsistence agriculture (Fitting 2011; Harvey 2003). This process underpinned accumulation in traditional and new zones of economic expansion in the United States.

The transition to flexible accumulation displaced important segments of the working class across borders, incorporating them into the new configurations of class adapted to the tendencies of deregulation (Kalb 2015). On the US East Coast, Mexican migrants filled the ranks of this new global and multiform proletariat (van der Linden 2014) inserted into different assemblages of capitalist relations. The growing absorption of Mexican labor from the late 1980s was a decisive force in the relaunching of a vast region in which deindustrialization and informalization went hand in hand. The service sector was dominated by producer services, an arrangement

known as the FIRE (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate) economy. These services required highly skilled workers and numerous low-skilled workers to “service the lifestyles and consumption requirements of the growing high-income professional and managerial class” (Sassen 1998, 48). Women, formerly as reserve labor, and immigrants, selected from the surplus populations of the Global South and impoverished areas of the Global North, filled low-wage service jobs.

Illegalized, disorganized, and deportable (De Genova 2002; Heyman 2014), Mexican migrants who arrived after the last amnesty in 1986—the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)³—were not incorporated into the United States in political-legal terms, although they are key to the creation of value for capital in post-Fordist forms of superexploitation—subcontracted, part-time, piece work, without contracts—in the proliferating service sector or in the masculinized construction sector. Subjected to growing numbers of containment and surveillance mechanisms (Goldstein and Alonso-Bejarano 2017; Martínez, Slack, and Martínez-Schuldt 2018; Slack et al. 2016), without social and labor rights (Sider 2006), and accused of using undeserved public resources (Chavez 2008), these new migrants deeply feel the effects of the dismantling of the United States’ welfare system in the different circuits in which they organize their social reproduction (schools, health services, food, and housing programs). In sum, illegality shaped the formation of this transnational and mobile working class not only in its relationship to capital but also with other segments of the US-born and resident working classes. Illegality also shaped the modalities, forms, and achievements of undocumented migrants’ struggles.

According to our surveys, migration in both towns grew rapidly in a short time, increasing 50% between 1993 and 1998. It continued growing, suffering only a few slight reductions, until 2007, the year the Great Recession started. At this point, there was an abrupt change in migration flows between Mexico and the United States: first migrations to the United States decreased, and returns to Mexico increased. Only a small portion of migrants improved their migration status over time. In the first migration, 92% were undocumented, while in the last migration, 83% maintained this disadvantaged status.

3. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized 2.3 million Mexicans who had worked and resided continuously in the country since 1982.

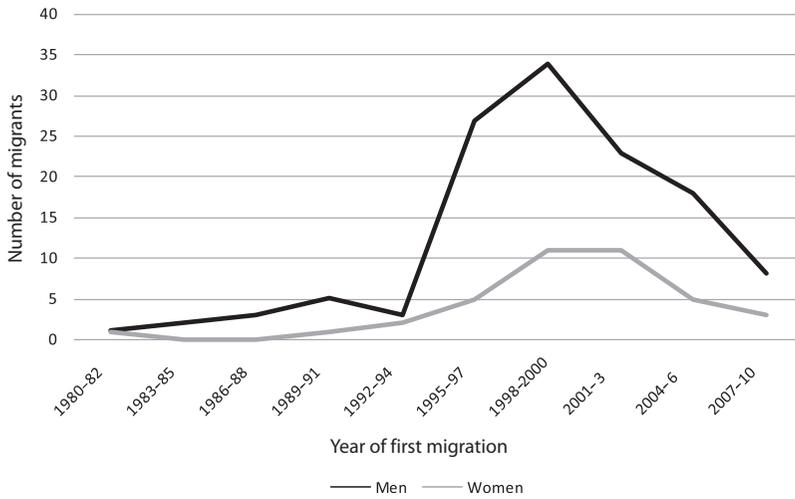


Figure 1. Pahuatlán: First international migration by gender. (Copyright 2020. From D'Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa PLC.)

In Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán, women's significant incorporation into migration flows lagged behind men's by about a decade (see fig. 1 and 2). Few women migrated in the 1980s; however, by the 1990s, dozens of women made their way to the United States. Like men's migration, the feminization of migration flows also exhibited an accelerated pattern albeit on a smaller scale. In total, almost one-quarter of migrants from Pahuatlán (23.4%) and Zapotitlán (23.9%) are women.

Young men and women at the beginning of their productive and reproductive lives were significant contingents of these new migratory flows. In the two towns, the majority of men who migrated from the end of the 1980s to the mid-1990s were between fifteen and twenty years old. By contrast, almost all of the women who migrated in the mid-1990s were between twenty-one and twenty-five years old. In both towns, unmarried men predominated in the first migrations, although it is important to mention that in Zapotitlán unmarried women (with or without preschool-aged children) exceeded the number of married women in first migrations. In Pahuatlán, only 40% of women were single (with or without preschool-aged children). Almost all married women migrated in company of their spouses, and some with their first child.

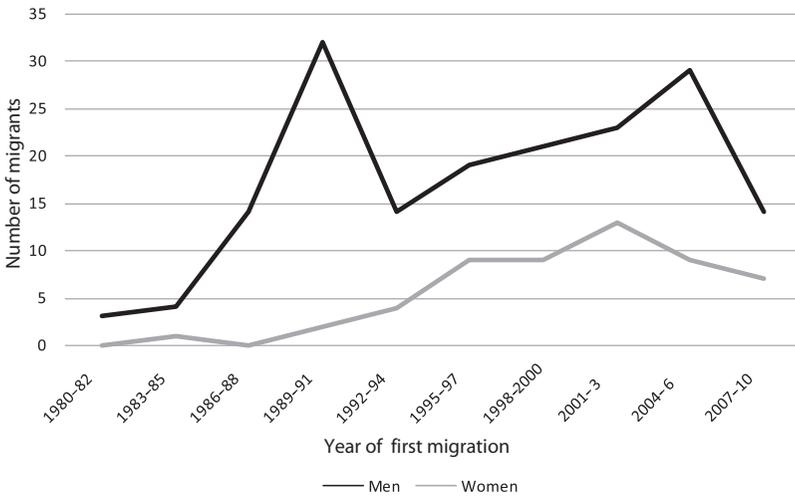


Figure 2. Zapotitlán: First international migration by gender. (Copyright 2020. From D'Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa PLC.)

Although spousal or family reunification is a common interpretation of women's migration, it was not the leitmotif of the displacements of these new global workers. The women from Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán were not passive agents dependent upon a male provider, often regarded as the economic subject par excellence. The feminization of migration from central Mexico—that is, women's incorporation into the rapidly growing flows in the 1990s to the mid-2000s—was a distinctive characteristic of accelerated migration registered in hundreds of towns in central and southern Mexico. As these flows quickly lost circularity after the mid-2000s, due to increasingly restrictive immigration policies, many migrants settled in the United States. The number of births to Mexican immigrants in the United States was greater than new immigrant arrivals, a result of the feminization of migration and settlement of Mexican immigrants (Pew Research Center 2011).

Feminist scholars have highlighted the feminization of migration as not only a process that refers to the increased participation of women in migration flows but also one that makes visible the vast numbers of women who migrate to work and not only for family reunification (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Oso and Ribas-Mateos 2013; Verschuur 2013). The need for migrant women's labor in recent decades in the United States and other affluent countries of

the Global North is related to the decline of the value of real wages since the 1970s in the context of financialized capitalism. This decline increased the number of hours of paid work that households required for the reproduction of their members, thus leading to the massive incorporation of middle-class women into the labor force (Fraser 2017). Although women took up paid work to shore up declining household income, the state did not expand investment into reproduction, such as public childcare or paid family and medical leave. As a result, this “crisis of care” was temporarily “resolved” by shifting middle-class women’s reproductive labor onto racialized minorities from poorer countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Marchand and Runyan 2011). Immigrant women work in the private provision of reproductive work in homes (e.g., domestics, nannies, elderly caretakers), directly replacing US-born women’s reproductive labor (Parreñas 2001). Immigrant women and men are also a major source of reproductive labor performed in commercialized services such as food preparation and service, cleaning services, laundries, household maintenance, and so forth (Duffy 2007; Sassen 1998). Their insertion into these sectors of the service economy that underpin the social reproduction of workers and their dependents has played a central role in mitigating the “crisis of care” in the United States.

The feminization of these accelerated flows requires a focus not only on the productive sphere—the insertion in labor markets, wages, employer-employee relations, et cetera—but also on social reproduction and the daily struggles beyond the workplace. Capitalism is a total system, one in which the labor to produce commodities and the labor to produce people are intimately connected (Bhattacharya 2017, 3). This perspective calls attention to the ways that the reorganization of economic production and the deregulation of labor markets in the flexible-accumulation regime destabilized social reproduction in the “hidden abodes”—namely, households—that is crucial for sustained capital accumulation (Fraser 2014). This process led to the “crisis of care” (Fraser 2017). Female immigrants from peripheral areas of capital absorbed the shocks of the contradictions unleashed by the dismantling of the formula *male provider/female homemaker*, a pillar of the Fordist regime. Care work and daily maintenance of household members were transferred to other reproductive circuits controlled by the market or the state, where precarious employment abounds. In these circuits, US-born women and immigrant women and men are over-represented.

By following up with migrants, with whom we had prior contact, in the United States and in Puebla during the pandemic through phone calls and social media, we know that the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 economic and health crisis dramatically and differentially impacted the service and construction sectors in the United States. In the following sections, we take a tentative inventory of the new conditions shaping migrants' households during the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City and Durham County, North Carolina, the places where Zapotitecos/as and Pahuatecos/as have settled, respectively.

Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Employment in New York City and Durham, North Carolina

In the United States, the Great Recession, which began in the financial sector and rippled across other sectors, had a profound impact on Pahuatecan men's employment in construction and a minor impact on men and women from Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán who worked in services. During the COVID-19 economic and health crisis, however, the historic fall in GDP in the United States in the second quarter of 2020—more than 30%, according to the Bureau of Economic Affairs (2020)—indicates that this crisis had a broader initial impact across the economy when compared with the Great Recession. The COVID-19 economic crisis's significant impact on the leisure and hospitality and other services sectors supports our observations that men and women from Zapotitlán and women from Pahuatlán experienced high levels of unemployment. At the same time, the data shows a small amount of growth in the construction sector in Durham, a sector where men from Pahuatlán are overly concentrated.

We present employment data from April and June 2020, a period that corresponds to the first peak of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the United States, although cases were distributed unevenly nationally. New York City devolved into the epicenter of the outbreak from March to April 2020 and implemented social-distancing measures beginning in March. North Carolina required social-distancing measures in late March, although the number of cases reported remained relatively low during this time period.

The closures of schools and nonessential businesses to stem the spread of the virus from March to May and the restricted reopening of businesses from May to July led to an unprecedented economic crisis. Social distancing had an immediate impact on restaurants, bars, domestic services, and other forms of work that require close contact among laborers, employers, clients, and customers. Other

workplaces operated at reduced capacity, sometimes laying off workers. Unemployment trends in the United States from March to June 2020 provide some insight into how the crisis has affected the labor markets into which Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as have traditionally been inserted (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b).

The employment data from April 2020 show dramatic reductions in overall employment when compared to the same month in 2019: a 10% reduction in Durham and a 19.2% fall in New York City. In Durham, manufacturing (−11.8%), leisure and hospitality (−55.1%), and other services (−22.8%) showed the greatest reduction in employment (see table 1). The fact that construction suffered no reduction in April is notable, given the importance of the sector for

Table 1. Employment statistics, April 2020

	Durham, NC			New York City		
	April 2020	Number	Percent	April 2020	Number	Percent
Employment (number in thousands)						
Total nonfarm	287.8	−34.9	−10.8	3,756.90	−891.8	−19.2
Mining, logging, and construction	9	0	0	78.1	−83.2	−51.6
Manufacturing	24.6	−3.3	−11.8	45.6	−22	−32.5
Trade, transportation, and utilities	36.1	−2.6	−6.7	467.1	−160.4	−25.6
Information	4.5	−0.2	−4.3	204.8	−5.4	−2.6
Financial activities	15	−0.2	−1.3	454.7	−22.8	−4.8
Professional and business services	42.1	−2.7	−6	688.6	−100.6	−12.7
Education and health services	67.7	−5.5	−7.5	968	−100.3	−9.4
Leisure and hospitality	12.9	−15.8	−55.1	131.3	−335.5	−71.9
Other services	8.8	−2.6	−22.8	140	−54.8	−28.1
Government	67.1	−2	−2.9	578.7	−6.8	−1.2

Source: Current Employment Statistics, US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b.

men from Pahuatlán. In New York City, where unemployment was much worse across the board compared with Durham, mining, logging, and construction (−51.6%), manufacturing (−32.5%), leisure and hospitality (−71.3%), and other services (−28.1%) were the sectors with the highest rates of unemployment. The profound drop in the leisure and hospitality sector—which includes restaurants—is particularly notable. Men from Zapotitlán are highly concentrated in this sector, whereas women are concentrated in hair and nail salons and as domestics, that is, in the other services sector.

In June, the number of people employed increased slightly compared with April 2020, probably due to tentative reopening in both states (see table 2). However, employment remained

Table 2. Employment statistics, June 2020

	Durham, NC			New York City		
	June 2020	Number	Percent	June 2020	Number	Percent
Employment (number in thousands)						
Total nonfarm	291.4	−27.7	−8.7	3891.7	−777.3	−16.6
Mining, logging, and construction	9.4	0.2	2.2	123.7	−38.2	−23.6
Manufacturing	21.3	−6.8	−24.2	53.3	−14.7	−21.6
Trade, transportation, and utilities	37.8	−2.0	−5.0	498.5	−136.7	−21.6
Information	4.6	−0.2	−4.2	200.4	−13.2	−6.2
Financial activities	15.3	−0.6	−3.8	452.5	−34.2	−7.0
Professional and business services	41.4	−3.7	−8.2	687.5	−113.4	−14.2
Education and health services	68.3	−4.3	−5.9	966.0	−73.9	−7.1
Leisure and hospitality	17.3	−11.6	−40.1	199.5	−278.9	−58.3
Other services	11.1	−0.5	−4.3	140.7	−54.8	−28
Government	64.9	1.8	2.9	569.6	−19.3	−3.3

Source: Current Employment Statistics, US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020a, 2020b.

significantly below June 2019 (−8.7% in Durham and −16.6% in New York City). Manufacturing and leisure and hospitality remained sectors with the greatest loss in employment in Durham, while in New York City, the leisure and hospitality sector, other services, and mining, logging, and construction continued to experience high levels of unemployment. The abrupt and profound loss in employment during the pandemic in sectors where migrants from Puebla had traditionally been inserted was devastating.

An additional measure of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on immigrants comes from remittance data. Evidence from the Bank of Mexico shows the negative impact of the crisis on migrants from Puebla (Li Ng 2020). Comparing the second quarters (April–June) of 2019 and 2020, there was a 12.7% drop in remittances to the state of Puebla, which represents almost 60 million US dollars. Virtually every state in central and southern Mexico experienced some decline in remittances, except for Mexico City. In contrast, remittances to northern border states and from traditional sending states in western Mexico increased. According to the report, the differences are likely the result of three factors: (1) Restricted cross-border mobility on the northern border encouraged the use of banking services to deliver remittances that were normally delivered in person. (2) Well-established migrants in the United States (those from northern and western Mexican states with long-standing ties to the United States) were relatively unaffected by the crisis, because of their more permanent migratory and citizenship status that allowed for greater stability in the labor market. (3) Migrants with less-established ties (migrants from the central and southern states) with more precarious legal status and labor-market insertion were more affected by the crisis and, therefore, unable to send the same amount of remittances as before the crisis. We believe that the last hypothesis applied to the post-IRCA migrants from Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán. The significant decrease in remittances is evidence of the impact of unemployment during the crisis in the labor markets in which Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as were inserted.

Articulating the COVID-19 Crisis with the Social-Reproductive Crisis

Mother-Workers and the Double Shift

With social-distancing measures in place during the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, the COVID-19 crisis upset the circuits of social

reproduction far more than the Great Recession. Mainstream news reports registered the increased labor demands on parents, especially on mother-workers, who, before the pandemic, relied heavily on social-reproductive circuits in order to care for children and other dependents: from the domestics and caretakers within their homes to the daycare centers, schools, and after-school programs in their communities. For mother-workers whose paid work could not be performed from home, they faced the challenge of finding care for their children and adequate supervision for online schooling in the context of massive school and daycare closures. For those who worked from home during the crisis, they faced the challenge of balancing paid work with childcare and online schooling within the home. “They Go to Mommy First: How The Pandemic Is Disproportionately Disrupting Mothers’ Careers” (Grose 2020), “The Pandemic’s Setbacks for Working Moms” (Goldberg 2020), and “As School Begins, Mothers Working Retail Jobs Feel Extra Burden” (Corkery and Maheshwari 2020) were some of the headlines in the *New York Times*, during the pandemic, introducing articles that discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the delicate work-life balance of mother-workers.

Through the feminization of labor and migration and the expansion of social reproduction into commercial services since the 1980s, a significant proportion of mother-workers’ social-reproductive labor was replaced by paid domestic workers or care and service workers. This massive shift evoked by the feminization of labor and migration, however, was not accompanied by a reorganization in the sexual division of labor within the household. As a result, mother-workers, traditionally assigned the majority of housework even in dual-earning households, were particularly vocal about how the COVID-19 crisis impacted their ability to do their jobs.

These reports represent a flashback to earlier struggles of second-wave feminism and the efforts to make social-reproductive labor, particularly housework, visible (Dalla Costa and James 1997). During the pandemic, for women shouldering paid work at home or outside the home, domestic work, and online schooling for their children, their experiences brought back into focus the gender inequalities—the double shifts—of working wives and mothers to whom feminists drew attention beginning in the 1970s. The impact of COVID-19, therefore, obliged mother-workers to take on more of the burdensome double shifts—assuming the lion’s share of reproductive tasks with the added charge of helping school-aged children with their online classes.

To understand this unprecedented situation that unfolded during the pandemic, it is useful to recall Nancy Fraser's descriptions of the regimes of social reproduction. For a large part of the twentieth century, a situation existed in which social reproduction was provided through state and private sector through the "family wage." When state-managed capitalism, however, devolved into the current globalizing financialized capitalism, social reproduction was externalized onto families and communities (Fraser 2017). This care burden has been mitigated by the influx of immigrants to provide low-cost reproductive services in circuits of social reproduction (households and commercial services). However, during COVID-19 and the social-distancing measures required to stem the spread of infections, the reproductive work of immigrants no longer temporarily mitigated the tension, making the crisis of care more visible, not only within the state (which offered fewer provisions) but also in the circuits of care provisioning in the private sector and in households.

The feminist gaze on the COVID-induced double shift on women is a salutary development. A gender perspective underscores the uneven impacts of crisis. What has been less visible, however, are the impacts on immigrants who are over-represented in service industries essential to social reproduction that voraciously consume racialized low-waged, part-time, casual, and temporary labor. Immigrant laborers, like the Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as whom we have followed for over a decade (D'Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020), were heavily concentrated in these industries in the flexible-accumulation regime that emerged from the last decades of the twentieth century. While these industries experienced relatively few shocks during the Great Recession, they have been massively affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

Increased Informalization and Devaluing of Immigrant Labor

Formed as illegalized, disposable immigrant laborers under the flexible-accumulation regime, Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as' insertion into labor markets has been shaped by the informalization and casualization of work during the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century. The dismantled labor conditions under Fordism were replaced by regressive policies (lack of benefits, temporary jobs, seasonal layoffs, substitution of salaries with tips, etc.) that, by devaluing labor, valorized capital. Through phone calls and social media, we witnessed how these precarious labor conditions were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the crisis, immigrant households lost

a significant part of their income. Women and men's roles as providers were jeopardized because they lost their jobs, had their hours cut, or lost their clients. To a greater extent than what we observed during the Great Recession, Pahuatecos/as and Zapotitecos/as took up a range of informalized activities to obtain nonwaged income. They rearranged domestic spaces in order to produce goods and services for kinship and community. For example, while selling food from one's home was a complementary, weekend activity for some households before the crisis, it became the sole source of income during the pandemic. Or, alternatively, some lost their customers during the pandemic (see the example of Clara below). Some Pahuatecan men with carpentry skills learned during their time as construction workers made tables, bookshelves, and other furniture in improvised workshops in their homes. In order to reduce the costs of reproduction to a minimum, relatives and friends moved in with each other, saving on rent.

This informalization reminds us that not everything that is put on workers' tables comes from a wage (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014). The reproduction of this vital workforce depends on numerous activities that are nonwaged, ones that remain "hidden" to capital. These new, hyper-informalized workers have the capacity to make themselves cheaper to capital through a form of "voluntary" degradation of their life conditions, in order to exchange their labor power with greater advantages over more expensive US-born workers or immigrant workers with more permanent migratory statuses. Under capitalism, workers are differentiated not only by their point of insertion into the labor market but also by the value and quality of social reproduction invested in them over time. Tithi Bhattacharya explains this point in the following way:

Attention to social reproductive activities reveals the specific social processes through which certain workers, embodying certain qualities of labour-power, arrive at the doorstep of capital more vulnerable and degraded than others. Ruthlessly depressed levels of "necessary wants" for Latino workers in the USA is one example of the brutally differentiated processes of social reproduction between migrant workers and their citizen counterparts. (2019, 118)

The minimum social rules considered just in the framework of the Fordist pact between capital and labor—formal jobs, social security, and workers' protections—were norms historically shaped by the aspirations, habitus, and struggles of the working classes in relation to capital to limit the degradation of their life conditions. In the current scenario of the flexible-accumulation regime,

illegalized immigrant workers accept working conditions that are inferior to those that correspond to the standards of life of US-born or permanent resident workers, conditions almost at a minimum level of their needs and satisfaction of their livelihoods. The following three examples illustrate how immigrants reduced the costs of reproduction to a minimum in order to weather the first months of the pandemic.

Clara.⁴ Before the pandemic, Clara, a thirty-eight-year-old woman from Zapotitlán and mother of three US-born daughters (six, two, and one years of age), made and sold cakes from her apartment in the Bronx, New York. Working from home allowed her to stay home with her youngest daughters and earn “a little extra” for herself and her family while her other daughter attended school. Her husband, a waiter at a nearby restaurant, supplied the majority of the household income. Although being a waiter was a relatively well-paid job in the restaurant industry before the pandemic, in mid-March 2020, the restaurant where her husband worked closed indoor service, leaving him without work. Party cancellations also led to cake-order cancellations, eliminating Clara’s income. A tax refund in April 2020, along with a small amount of savings, helped the family through that month.⁵ However, by May, money was extremely tight. Because of their undocumented status, her husband was not eligible for unemployment benefits, nor could the couple receive the stimulus payments on behalf of their US-citizen children, which proved to be a lifeline for many families during the pandemic.⁶ Furthermore, the couple did not want to apply for food stamps and risk being labeled a “public charge,” a status that they believed could affect their future opportunities to regularize their status.⁷ Their landlord

4. The names of people from Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán have been changed to protect their identity. Research was conducted in Spanish and translated by the authors.

5. Like many undocumented migrants, Clara’s husband used a Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) in order to file his federal and state taxes, claim a tax refund on the amount of tax he overpaid during the year, and claim child tax credits for his US-born children.

6. The US government provided economic stimulus payments in 2020 and 2021 to taxpayers and their dependents in an effort to provide financial assistance during the pandemic. Undocumented parents could receive stimulus payments for their US-born children only in the third, and last, round of payments made in 2021.

7. As undocumented parents of US-born children, Clara and her husband could apply for benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—colloquially known as “food stamps”) on behalf of their three US-born children without accruing the label of “public charge.” However, like many immigrants, they were wary of jeopardizing their future ability to regularize their status by using public-

offered only a fifty-dollar reduction off their \$1,400 monthly rent, not nearly enough of a discount to make a difference for the family's severely reduced budget. Clara and her husband channeled their scarce cash reserves, supplemented with a few loans from family members, into the rent, telephone, and electric bills. In addition to the food they already received through the Women, Infants' and Children (WIC) supplemental food program, they received food donations from a community organization in the Bronx (and diapers on a few occasions) and from a city food program. Clara described how she had to ration food to make it last and how excited her oldest daughter was to receive a sandwich and juice in a box lunch delivered to the house, something to break the monotony of the rice and beans that Clara struggled to put on the table. When her husband was called back to work at the end of June, after the city allowed outdoor dining, he worked as a waiter two days a week and at the telephone taking takeout and delivery orders three days a week. Although taking orders did not pay as much as waiting tables, it was a secure job, one that would still be needed if the restaurant had to close outdoor dining in the future. Through the summer of 2020, his income was well below his prepandemic wages; however, it allowed the couple to more or less keep up with the rent and the utility bills, while they continued to rely on the food subsidies and donation programs to feed their family.

Emilia. Emilia, a mother-worker with four children living at home (twenty-three, twenty-one, fifteen, and ten years of age), maintained her job and hours during the pandemic. Her husband, a carpenter and handyman, was out of work for only two weeks in April 2020 and then resumed the projects he had been working on previously. Emilia noted that their Long Island community did not suffer as many infections and deaths in the first few months as New York City. More importantly, her principle employer for the last fifteen years—a fast-food restaurant—never closed down. Despite receiving only her salary and no benefits (no health care, paid sick days, paid vacation, pension, etc.), Emilia discussed the importance of her job: “I never leave my job because even if it rains, or there is a hurricane or a snow storm, it is always, always open. There are

assistance programs. This misperception, along with language issues, lack of knowledge of the program, and concerns about liabilities to sponsors (in the case of immigrants with regular status who are required to have sponsorship) results in low participation rates in SNAP among children in families with foreign-born parents (Hanson et al. 2014; US Department of Agriculture 2011).

always customers. Sometimes there are fewer customers, but I always have work . . . they always give me my forty hours" (Phone interview, August 27, 2021). Although indoor dining closed for several months at the beginning of the pandemic, restaurant management retained Emilia because her job taking and assembling orders for the drive-through was vital for continued operation. On her days off from the restaurant, Emilia also continued cleaning offices for a few hours and extra income.

Emilia's ability to maximize her productive capacities and continue working during the pandemic was made possible by the fact that her younger children, who took classes online from home, were cared for by her oldest daughter, who ensured that they attended online classes and completed their school work. The twenty-three-year-old lost her part-time job as a martial arts teacher in March 2020, when the studio closed because of social-distancing requirements; as a result, she was "available" for unpaid reproductive labor in the household—that is, Emilia's availability and flexibility vis-à-vis capital was made possible through the "privatization" of her youngest children's care, labor assigned to her adult daughter when their schools closed.

Clara and Emilia's contrasting experiences illustrate the fact that not all women have the same reproductive workload during their life cycle. In addition to class and ethnic-racial hierarchies, reproductive labor is shaped by the composition and demographic transitions of women's households.

Sergio. Sergio owned a deli in a small town in Rockland County, New York, that did a steady business feeding lunch to office workers. He signed a three-year rent contract and invested heavily in equipment to adequately condition the space for food preparation and serving. In addition to the deli, a few evenings each week, Sergio worked his food truck, serving burritos to customers in the neighborhood. At the end of March 2020, the offices near the deli closed, sending almost all workers into home office. Sergio closed the deli completely during the month of April 2020, knowing that he had, for the time being, lost his clientele. As for the food truck, business was extremely slow, and Sergio was forced to close it down.

Sergio decided to reopen the deli in May for takeout and delivery orders; he could not afford to keep it closed because he had to pay the rent and make the payments on the loan he took out to condition the restaurant. Although he received some help with payroll costs and the rent and loan payments through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), the number of paid hours he could offer staff was

severely reduced.⁸ His staff dwindled from six full-time employees to three. Furthermore, Sergio took on thirty additional hours of work a week, working a total of seventy hours a week. Through staff attrition and by taking on extra hours himself without earning additional income, Sergio reduced payroll costs—the most expensive part of the business—to keep the deli afloat. In effect, he cheapened his labor to be able to continue paying the bills.

Sergio's ability to weather the shocks of the abrupt changes during the COVID-19 economic crisis depended on his wife's unpaid reproductive labor dedicated to the care of their two US-born daughters (four and one years of age). Occasionally, an extended family member looked after the children for free, and his wife "helped" Sergio in the restaurant as an unpaid worker, further reducing labor costs in the deli. Ineligible for stimulus payments because of their undocumented status, Sergio and his wife struggled to keep the deli open in order to cover their basic needs and those of their US-born children.

Fraser has referred to the way in which capital "free-rides" on activities that "produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free" (Fraser 2016, 101). We can conclude that, during the first months of the COVID-19 economic crisis, the responsibility of the maintenance of immigrants' lives was further unloaded onto them. Cheapening their labor, transferring unpaid reproductive labor to other household members, and engaging in informalized activities that sustained their networks, they absorbed the worst effects of the COVID-19 economic crisis. The flexibility of immigrant households to rearrange their composition and their organization of reproductive activities "allow them to cut certain costs and to hold other costs below the norm for nonmigrants" (Cravey 2003, 618). It should be noted that increasing the number of members within immigrant households—a common way to reduce costs—posed greater health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the inability of household members to socially distance under these circumstances. They reproduced themselves at the bare minimum, and with elevated health risks.

The federal government's attempts to distribute emergency payments to US households during the first months of the COVID-

8. The PPP, part of the \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (signed into law in March 2020), transferred federal money to small businesses in the form of forgivable loans to help them with payroll, benefits, utilities, mortgage, and rent expenses.

19-induced economic crisis bypassed many citizens and immigrants. Immigrants who paid taxes yet did not have a Social Security Number (available to citizens and some immigrants), like Clara's husband and Sergio, were ineligible for the payments. Furthermore, US citizens with a Social Security Number who filed taxes with their spouses without a Social Security Number, and any dependent children, were also ineligible for the first and second rounds of payments in 2020. In all, 9.9 million undocumented migrants were excluded, 3.7 million children, and 1.7 million spouses, many of whom are US citizens or have authorization to be in the country (Chishti and Bolter 2020). It was not until 2021, when the American Rescue Plan Act was signed into law, that these 5.4 million US citizens or authorized immigrants were eligible for the third, and final, round of stimulus checks. Furthermore, even though many contributed to the unemployment insurance fund, undocumented workers were ineligible for federal unemployment benefits. These measures illustrate how immigration status continues to be a potent mechanism to differentiate the working classes (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), attempting to create divisions, fragment interests, and destroy solidarity.

Conclusions

According to our preliminary observations, the effects of the COVID-19 economic and health crisis were far greater for immigrants from Pahuatlán and Zapotitlán in central Mexico than the effects of the Great Recession. Social-distancing measures during the first wave of the pandemic (March–June 2020) profoundly disrupted employment for service workers in restaurants, bars, personal care, and in domestic cleaning and care work. High unemployment rates among service workers revealed how the COVID-19 crisis upset the circuits of social reproduction far more than the Great Recession. Through this situation, the precarity created through the substitution of women's reproductive labor with low-income, racialized immigrant labor is made visible. The dependency on casual, part-time feminized labor for social reproduction to mitigate the "crisis of care" is part of the conditions through which accumulation has been sustained by the globalizing financialized capitalism of the present era (Fraser 2017, 25).

Immigrants and US-born laborers involved in social-reproductive labor had hours reduced and lost their jobs or their clients. Preparing and selling food from their homes, taking in additional household members, relying on food donations, and other measures allowed immigrant and mixed-status households to cut costs and weather the

crisis. Leaning heavily on the solidarity of kinship, friendship, and ethnic relationships, these cost-reducing actions cheapened immigrants' labor in relation to capital (Bhattacharya 2019; Cravey 2003; cf. Narotzky 2015). This ability to reproduce themselves and their dependents at a minimum level of their needs, one that is well below the standards of life of US-born workers, may explain the lack of organization and widespread protests demanding greater support for social-reproductive life-sustaining activities. The lack of unrest among the immigrants excluded from government support during the pandemic allows capital to “free ride” (Fraser 2016, 101) on the social-reproductive labor that maintains immigrant life, despite how minimized these life activities may be given the high rates of lost income and jobs. Reproducing themselves at a minimum, immigrants mitigated capital's destabilizing tendencies.

Immigrants are rewarded very poorly for these capital-sustaining efforts. Instead, the administration of former US president Donald Trump had pursued extremely harsh anti-immigrant policies, using inflammatory language and stirring up xenophobic sentiment. The message of the undeservingness of immigrants is countered by significant resistance from immigrant-rights groups who view migration as a human right and underscore the positive contribution immigrants make to the country. The need for immigrant labor, especially the “essential” labor required to fight the pandemic, ran counter to the anti-immigrant fervor embraced by Trump and his base. The gap between the idea that immigration policy regulates labor for capital and the political goals of anti-immigrant politicians to stir up “in-group” sentiment and political support at the cost of creating deep divisions in society was particularly stark during the COVID-19 pandemic. These colliding logics and the unresolved contradictions they create—in the absence of serious immigration reform—left immigrant and mixed-status Pahuatecan and Zapotitecan families to confront the first few months of the pandemic with very little support.

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