

# Unpacking the experiences and perspectives of Mexican immigrant women and their Dutch partners: An exploratory study

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# Unpacking the experiences and perspectives of Mexican immigrant women and their Dutch partners: An exploratory study

Marlene Andrade Benítez\*

## Introduction

What do we know about women's migration and foremost, what do we need to know about the sentimental relationships between Dutch men and Mexican women?

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Despite the evident presence of women in migration, it is until very recently that the gender perspective and female migration has become a focus in migration studies. For example, little attention has been paid to the migration of Mexican women to any countries other than the United States, including the study of the purposes of such migration and whether these are triggered by mere economic reasons. This study recognizes that considering non-economic factors are especially important for analysing the migration of women (Kofman, 2000).

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According to Montero-Sieburth and Cabrera Perez (2013), nearly 70% of Mexican immigrants in the Netherlands are women. Migration patterns and trajectories of the female Mexican-origin immigrant population in the Netherlands vastly differ from those of the Mexican diaspora in the United States. The data shows that one of characteristics of these migratory patterns is that the Mexican immigrant population in the Netherlands is composed mostly of highly-educated women who migrated due to romantic relationships and family formation purposes<sup>i</sup> (Montero-Sieburth & Cabrera Pérez, 2013).

“Little attention has been paid to the migration of Mexican women and whether this is triggered by mere economic reasons”

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Why is this case worth studying?

In the case of the romantic relationships between Dutch males and Mexican females, it is worth to raise the question of how gender influences the decision to migrate due to being engaged in a romantic relationship, and to consider the challenges of this type of relationship. Furthermore, it is important to take into account the social, economic and professional sacrifices that Mexican women who migrate to the Netherlands may face.

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<sup>i</sup> Such characteristics of Mexican immigrant women could fit in the description of “love migrants”, i.e., people who migrate for romantic purposes. The number of this type of migrants significantly multiplied in the 1990s as a result of new information

and communication technologies, making the existence of this type of migration - based on motivation that differs from the traditional economic one – more evident (Girona et al., 2012).

Although based on a small sample, this exploratory study is designed to serve as a starting point for examining how Mexican women and Dutch men engage in this type of romantic relationships, according to participants' reported experiences. Additionally, this exploratory study aims to start documenting the aspirations of Mexican immigrant women residing in the Netherlands, attempting to portray what they leave behind, what they might sacrifice, and what they are potentially expecting in the early stage of their migration process. These questions form the basis for deeper research on the topic, and may enable us to (hypothetically) unpack the migrants' suitcase and deeply study what is inside.

## Theoretical Framework

The present study is considered a gendered-approach study, because it explores the gender agency of both Dutch men and Mexican women constituting these couples. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>ii</sup>, gender can be understood as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Pessar and Mahler (2003) highlight the fact that gender is one of the oldest forces shaping human life, and in migration research, this fact has been side-lined.

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At the moment of operationalizing gender, Pessar and Mahler (2003) recognize that it is much more complex than the biological differences between sexes, and involves the ways in which (which vary depending on culture) males and females perform different activities in a determinate space and time. Noticeably, "[...] major areas of life, including sexuality, family, education, economy, and the state, are organized according to gender principles" (Glenn, 1999, cited in Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 813).

<sup>ii</sup> World Health Organization. Gender, Women and Health. <http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/>

Accessed in May 2014.

Similarly, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) argues that “gender organizes and shapes our opportunities and life chances” (p.2). Furthermore, according to Castro (2009), gender can be understood as a construction, a process in which men and women negotiate and reaffirm their own identity, while institutions and society itself are important actors in this process.

Given that the study of gender concerns men and women, it should be highlighted that in 2006, women constituted almost half of all international migrants worldwide: 95 million or 49.6 percent (Alcalá & Leidl, 2006). Of the 15-16 million third country nationals living in Europe in 2000, women constituted around forty-five percent (Kofman, 2000). Strikingly, however, the conceptualization of the

## “Women constitute almost half of all international migrants worldwide”

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migrant as a person pursuing economic gains has resulted into a loss of focus on women who voluntarily choose to become international migrants (Zlotnik, 1995). In fact, the overused scheme of an international migrant portrayed as a young, economically-motivated male, has become so dominant that it has overshadowed migration streams that are shaped by females (Houstoun et al., 1984). The number of female migrants in Europe has been increasing significantly in the last two decades (Zlotnik, 1995, cited in Kofman, 2000). In this context, Castles and Miller (1993), consider the feminization of international migration as one of the major tendencies of the past twenty years, family reunification being the major path of entry for women into Europe (Kofman, 2000). Nonetheless, immigration patterns that are female-dominated in the European context, such as family reunification and family formation

have received relatively little attention, an observation already acknowledged in the 90s by scholars such as Cohen (1995) and Zlotnik (1995).

“During the past twenty years,  
family reunification has been the  
major path of entry for women  
into Europe”

As stated by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2011), “the goal in scholarship research is to make of gender an institutional part of immigration studies” (p.219). Similarly, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, cited in Pessar & Mahler 2003) argued that “[g]ender is not simply a variable to be measured, but a set of social relations that organize immigration patterns [...] the task is to begin with an examination of how gender relations [which are exercised in relational and dynamic ways] facilitate or constrain both women’s and men’s immigration and settlement” (p.814). Finally, Kofman (2000) states that migration offers both women and men an opportunity to modify gender roles and the constraints allocated within them. This can represent a source of escape especially for women who have negatively experienced gendered lives in their communities. Some may consider migration as an opportunity to abandon the oppressive gender structures in which they have had to live their lives.

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## Methods

The qualitative research method is especially effective at obtaining culturally-specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular groups. Therefore, this type of research is the basis of this

study, which seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of the given research problem from the perspective of the selected sample. Furthermore, this study embraces an interpretative approach where, human beings are understood not as objects, but as agents who actively collaborate to construct (and deconstruct) their culture and practices (Schwartz-Shea et al., 2012). In order to start unpacking the experiences and perspectives of the Mexican immigrant women and their Dutch partners, the qualitative tool of in-depth interview was found to be most suitable. In total, 16 in-depth interviews (with 8 couples) were conducted using an open-ended questionnaire for Dutch men and Mexican women accordingly.

“Participants were asked to describe their experiences of being married to someone from another culture”

#### The interview setting

Seven of the eight couples were interviewed face to face, six of them at their homes and one in a public cafeteria. The partners were interviewed separately in order to give them more freedom to answer honestly, without being affected by the presence of the other partner. The duration of each interview was from fifty minutes to almost two hours, depending on the answers of the individual participants. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed (verbatim<sup>iii</sup>) afterwards. The questionnaire was composed of several demographic questions and questions inquiring into participants’ experiences of being partners/married to someone from another culture, the advantages and disadvantages of it, and, - particularly for the Mexican

<sup>iii</sup> Word by word.

women - their expectations and current professional status in the Netherlands.

The interviewees offered to have further interaction after the interview by inviting the ethnographer for food or coffee. This gave the researcher an opportunity to participate in the respondents' family life, thereby gaining more information on the family dynamics and non-verbal cues on the relationship.

### Sample

Access to the sample was obtained through snowballing, starting from one couple putting the researcher in contact with more couples. The researcher additionally invited participants through a Facebook ad. The requirements for participation were as follows:

- Mexican women aged between 20 and 38<sup>iv</sup> years old, living together with their Dutch partners in the Netherlands, for a period longer than a year. XA  
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- Their Dutch partners, no age limit.<sup>v</sup>

The requirement of having lived with the partner for more than a year is based on the presumption that in this period, the migrant women would have had sufficient time to settle in the Netherlands and spend time with their Dutch partners, experiences relevant for this study. The age limit is also relevant because younger women are more likely to have more familiarity with and command of new technologies such as the Internet, social media and dating websites. Presumably, they may also have a different mindset regarding topics such as couples, family relations and gender roles.

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<sup>iv</sup> Initially 35 years was the age limit for participation; due to the interest of women aged 38 to participate, the age limit was extended.

<sup>v</sup> Although the age of the Dutch partner

was not limited in the requirements, in most of the cases they appeared to be between 1 to 3 years younger than their Mexican partners.

**Table 1** Sample of Mexican immigrant women<sup>vi</sup>

Name <sup>vii</sup>	Age	Education	Current occupation in NL	Years in NL
Araceli	34	Masters	Bank employee	4
Linda	34	Masters	Mailwoman and Dutch language student	1.5
Carmen	25	Masters	Administrative employee	3
Ana	25	Bachelor	Accountancy employee	4
Marieruz	31	Masters	Housewife / Job seeker	2
Adela	37	Bachelor	Housewife	4.5
Esmeralda	27	Bachelor (incomplete)	Administrative employee	2
Malena	38	Bachelor	Housewife / Job seeker	3

**Table 2** Sample of Dutch partners

Name <sup>viii</sup>	Age	Education	Occupation
Bastiaan	32	Post Master	Controller at a bank
Johan	33	MBO: Dutch Vocational Training	Employee in the metal industry
Rutger	23	Bachelor	Account manager
Eduart	29	Bachelor	IT (Own buisiness)
Hendrik	33	Masters	Geography teacher
Gijs	34	Masters	Process engineer
Laurens	28	Bachelor	Sales employee
Dries	35	Bachelor	Administrative employee at a bank

Seven out of the eight couples live in the Randstad area, considered the economic centre of the Netherlands (Man-shanden & de Smidt, 1992) and home to its four biggest cities, including Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The following table shows the primary demographic information of the Dutch partners.

<sup>vi</sup> Notice that the order of participants in the table is such that each participant is matched to her partner in Table 2; Araceli and Bastiaan, for instance, are a couple.

<sup>vii</sup> The names used here are fictitious

in order to preserve the privacy of the interviewees.

<sup>viii</sup> The names used here are fictitious in order to respect the privacy of the interviewees.

## Limitations & Ethnographer's position

One of the main issues concerning the study is the small number of participants. Additionally, as was reported by some of the participants, the high level of the female migrants' education might have played a significant role in the perceptions about their lives in Europe and professional expectations. The same goes for the reported socioeconomic background of all the Mexican women.

**“The personal struggle of being both insider and outsider is not only source of knowledge but also a source of self-criticism”**

Furthermore, it is also important to reflect on the position of the ethnographer in her effort to participate as an outsider. From the beginning, I positioned myself as a researcher, avoiding talking about my own personal experiences as a Mexican woman living in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the advantages of this were clear: familiarity with the stories and backgrounds of the Mexican women was useful, which for non-Mexican ethnographers could have been rather complicated. Moreover, my Spanish skills, knowledge of Mexican culture, slang, and popular sayings and expressions were of practical use. Hence, the position of the researcher regarding this study can be approached from the viewpoint of Westkott (1979), who states that “[t]he personal struggle of being both insider and outsider is not only source of knowledge and insight, but also a source of self-criticism” (p. 422). Despite of such limitations, I hope that the study contributes to the existent corpus of literature and provides answers to basic questions that will hopefully propel further research on the topic.

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## Analysis and Findings

The data gathered for this study comes primarily from in-depth and open-ended interviews with the 16 participants. Adding to this, the participants were asked to recall their experiences and some specific aspects of their stories, which were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. However, it should be noted that regarding in-depth interview data analysis, there is a close relationship between

### “Perceptions play an important role in the context of today’s international migration”

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the dominant themes emerged and the type of questions that participants were asked. Utilizing a questionnaire as a method of data collection heavily influences the type of data and results gathered. Nevertheless, a substantial effort was made to encourage the participants to go further in their answers and to clearly exemplify their statements. This article will only embrace some of the most significant findings<sup>ix</sup>, using a number of categories, discussed in turn below.

Marrying a Dutch man, marrying a Mexican woman.

*Perceptions of European and/or Dutch men. Perceptions of Mexican vs. Dutch women.*

Perceptions play an important role in the context of today’s international migration (Carling, 2002; Timmerman et al., 2010). Facilitated by new information and communication technologies (ICTs), now more than ever, people

<sup>ix</sup> Due to word constraint and to avoid redundancy, only selected verbatim quotes were included to illustrate the main themes of this study. The

names of the respondents have been changed for confidentiality reasons, while the cited age of the respondents is the actual one.

from all over the globe can benefit from mass information that contribute to seeing the possibility of migration as easier, independently of the fact that this information can also be unreliable. Timmerman et al. (2010) have presented an interesting analytical framework based on a research project called EUMAGINE that aims to analyse the immigrants' perceptions of Europe, as well as the perceptions of Europe of those who have not (yet) decided to migrate. This framework is applicable to the present case: understanding the perceptions of the Mexican immigrants at both moments - before and after migrating - can help assess whether and how these have been modified against the reality of the post-migration or settlement process. Accordingly, the Mexican interviewees were asked to express what their perceptions (prior to migrating) were of European, or in this case, Dutch men. More than half of them had positive perceptions of European men, which in turn seemed to make them feel more attracted at the moment of choosing a partner. Maricruz (31), for instance, stated that she "had the feeling that they were less jealous and less possessive, more respectful and that the way of treatment of women was more egalitarian."

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Similarly, Carmen (25) explained that:

About Europe in general, I used to think that there were no problems since they did not seem to have financial problems and so, but now I see that they have another kind of problems (laughter)... Anyway, always in the past, I was attracted to foreigners, like Mexicans, there are some things about Mexican men that I dislike... moreover, after getting to know Dutch men I came to realize that before anything, there is a lot of equality between men and women and it is not like they see women as untouchable or unreachable, they are like the ones who take the first step and they know that you are capable to do exactly the same as them, that is what I like.

On the other hand, how do these Dutch men perceive the image of Mexican women? Interestingly for the gender approach of this study, all of them agreed on one characteristic: they perceived Mexican women as “more caring and warmer.” The following statement serves as an example:

Well at the beginning I didn't know anything about them, but now I know and I think they are really nice, I am personally more attracted to them than to Dutch girls, I don't like the blond hair girls and yeah, you know the Mexicans are really interested in the people and they want to care of you. And yeah, Esmeralda is like that, when I am sick or I am not feeling well she takes care of me, she is really like a mom, and she really has the mother role in her. (Laurens, 28)

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“I think Dutch women are very focused on their career in the first place. They are very independent, that's a big difference”

When it comes to perceptions about Dutch women, the existent image of Western women as sexually liberated, independent and emancipated (Lutz, 1991) was also conveyed in the interviews with the Dutch men. The following excerpts present this claim.

I think Dutch women are very focused on their career in the first place. They are very independent, that's a big difference. They are quite, how can I say...business related, yeah, I think that's a huge difference. I have the feeling that, from my experience, they are more focused on their own; they are more individualistic, maybe. (Hendrik, 33)

The thing is that, Dutch women are really occupied with their career, and they are always looking in front of that, and not seeing the day for example. It is like: how can I get a better career and is not like... Yeah, really. For them is just a social status to have a relationship. And with Latin American women you don't have that, they are more, yeah, more close, yeah, more warm, giving more to the person that you are in love with. (Johan, 33)

Compared to Mexicans, Dutch women are not real fighters and I like to have people who really fight for their things and they know what they want, and that they don't get it or take it for granted, you know? But well, that's how it is here in Holland you know? We have a very good life here, but I like people who are going outside of that comfort zone and not only yeah, you know, stay at the level there is here. (Bastiaan, 32)

To conclude this section, it can be highlighted that Dutch men seemed to perceive Mexican women's gender roles as more traditional or family oriented. On the other hand, Dutch women were perceived as more related to business culture and professional development, emotionally colder and more individualistic.

#### Advantages and disadvantages of this type of relationship

The following section is based on the Mexican interviewees reflecting on what they consider as advantages of having a relationship with a Dutch man. The feeling of being with the one they love was emphasized, as well as aspects related to gender balance in a relationship. Maricruz (31) expressed this by saying that "[t]he advantages are many, [that she] found someone who understands [her], supports [her], someone who isn't a macho, someone who is open and honest." Similarly, Adela (37) stated the following:

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Here I don't have the continuous power struggle between men and women like is the case in Mexico. Here, my partner supports me and listens to me; while in Mexico regularly the man always wins for the same issue of the machismo. In this aspect, my life is better now.

However, what is it specifically that attracts them the most about their Dutch partners? The answers of most of the Mexican interviewees were along the following lines:

He is someone very honest and sincere, everything that he tells me he is going to do he does it, he has never failed me while making promises, I can trust his word 100% that gives me a lot of stability and security. I know he does not lie to me and what he says is exactly what he does, that makes me feel really secure.

XA Esmeralda (27), similarly expressed that “[h]e understands [her] when [she] feels sad, he understands [her] XS perfectly and [they] both do everything, [they] both work, XS [they] both cook and so.”

It appears to be that Mexican women attributed positive values such as honesty, understanding and loyalty to their Dutch partners, and that these were part of the motivation to choose a Dutch partner.

What attracts me the most is that he is very honest, too honest, he tells me everything, and he cannot hide a thing (laughter). That is what attracts me the most because I never met someone who was as honest as him, not only towards me, but also with his friends and everybody around him. (Ana, 25)

Similarly, Malena (38) says: “What attracts me the most? Everything! I love him! He is very good, he is very charitable, he is very loyal he doesn't lie. He says yes or no and does not cheat.”

Nevertheless, when they were asked to make a comparison between the relationship they have with their Dutch partner and past relationships with Mexican partners, most of the Mexican interviewees reflected as shown in the following examples:

Here, is more like 50%, 50%. Here you share the expenses and you share everything in half, or many times whoever earns the most spends the most and like that ... Another thing, here for example, in my case, it is very expensive to get a maid. In Mexico, there would be a woman who would clean my house, she would do everything. Here, if they help us is once a week or every two weeks, but in the end you have to do it yourself, cleaning. In Mexico, it is something that the woman is in charge of (to clean) and the man will never do it, because it is something cultural; my Mexican male friends say I will never do this, and they just leave their stuff. Here, my partner cleans, he really does! And I can perfectly tell him: if you throw this, you have to clean it yourself! And he will do so. And the same goes for me, we divide the household tasks. (Araceli, 34)

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“Cleaning, In Mexico, it is something that the woman is in charge. Here, my Dutch partner cleans”

The great majority of the Mexican participants highlighted equality in the relationship, in decision making and in the household, as valuable characteristics that they lacked in past relationships in Mexico.

Yeah, it is very different, because here, everything is more egalitarian. Therefore, we both work then we

both pay everything 50% and 50%. We have a shared bank account where we both put money in and from there we pay our stuff. (Ana, 25)

Finally, Mexican interviewees generally referred to their romantic relationship with Dutch men as more egalitarian when they compared it to relationships with Mexican men. The Mexican women who had a job in the Netherlands said that they had to contribute to expenses just as much as their partners. On the other hand, unemployed Mexican women in the Netherlands expressed that they felt equal as they had support from their partners not only economically, but also in household tasks if necessary. The great majority of Mexican participants qualified these characteristics as positive in this type of relationship, and hence a good reason to engage in a relationship with Dutch men.

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XS Most of the Dutch interviewees perceived that this type of relationship has several advantages. They believed that it changed their personality and their taste for other cultures. Rutger (23), for instance says the following: “I think there are many advantages, you both get to learn another culture which enriches you in so many ways you wouldn’t imagine before.”

Noticeable changes in the personality of many of the Dutch men were expressed as positive factors brought by the relationship with their Mexican partners.

I am more than 6 years together with Adela, and there are many things I have learnt from Adela... Now in all my food I put chili (laughter). But also Adela likes dancing a lot and does little crazy things here at home with the children and now, yeah I also do it like dancing together with the kids and so. I am sure all these things I learned them from Adela. (Gijs, 34)

Furthermore, one important characteristic that was mentioned by all Dutch participants was the amount of time and responsibility that they dedicate to their Mexican partner, which seemed to be way more compared to that in prior relationships with Dutch partners. This was considered a challenge for many; however, it was a change that they seemed to be willing to cope with.

Finally, Dutch partners identified many disadvantages to their relationship with Mexican women. Some of these factors were a greater economic and time investment on their Mexican partners, the distance of their Mexican partners to their families back in Mexico, the fastidious immigration procedures established by the Dutch State, and Dutch language as a barrier for their partners' integration.

“Dutch partners identified many disadvantages in this type of relationship such as greater economic investment and the fastidious immigration procedures”

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### *Cultural Differences*

The partners were asked to reflect on the characteristics of their relationship. One of them was the daily struggle with what they perceive as cultural differences, and how they cope with these. All participants agreed on several differences that could be linked to each other's culture. Moreover, for most<sup>x</sup> of the Dutch men, cultural differences were considered a disadvantage of this kind of relationship.

Some of the participants perceived that the gender differences were maximized due the differences in cultures.

Rutger (23) for examples said that: “Mexican women can be very much a drama queen sometimes! What it really always stays in my mind is that they can express their feelings very well.” Carmen (25) stated the following: “I talk about the feelings and Dutch men don’t talk about it; it is not easy for them to express themselves, which is the difficulty.”

## “What I would not like my children to learn from the Mexican culture is the machismo”

Within the theme of cultural differences, after expressing what they disliked about each other’s culture, the participants were asked to reflect on the things that they would like their children (in the future if they did not have them yet) to adopt from both cultures.

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Most Mexican women predominantly expressed values such as family union, Mexican traditions, and food and religion, as the things that they want their children to learn from Mexican culture. The Dutch men expressed the things that they would *not* like their children to adopt from Mexican culture. For many of them this was the Mexican culture of unpunctuality. Noticeably, when it was women’s turn to reflect upon what they perceive as negative values of the Mexican culture that they would not like their children to adopt, the great majority highlighted the topic of *machismo*<sup>xi</sup> as one of the existing social problems in Mexican culture; as Maricruz (31) expressed this as follows:

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<sup>x</sup> In the findings section, the terms “Most” and “The majority” are used to signify almost every person in the studied sample, either Mexican women or Dutch men (depending on the given context), with the excep-

tion of maybe one or two. “Many” or “Several” is used to mean approximately half of the group, while “A few” or “Some” refers to roughly 2 or 3 out of each group of 8.

What I would not like them (to take) from the Mexican culture is to become machos, I would like them to learn that women are the same and have the same rights as a man, that (they) have the same advantages and disadvantages etc. That is what I would not like them to learn, the machismo from Mexico.

Furthermore, when the female participants were asked to reflect on what they perceive as Dutch culture, the answers were unified. These women identified rules of behaviour and discipline, values such as honesty and integrity as the important things to be adopted by their children from Dutch culture. For the great majority, there was nothing significant to be excluded or avoided from Dutch culture.

Imagined Europe and reality. Living outcomes for Mexican women: Are they better off living in the Netherlands?

What did these women perceive as the best aspect of living in the Netherlands? Equality was the most common indicator. Most of the Mexican women seemed to admire and enjoy the egalitarian system in the Netherlands, equality in the work place, and equality in the familiar sphere.

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Another indicator was safety. Safety made Mexican women enjoy their freedom of movement in the Netherlands. Many referred to the current situation in Mexico, and emphasized how valuable is to be in a safe country such as the Netherlands, identifying this as one of the best things about living in the Netherlands.

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<sup>xi</sup> The definition of machismo as given by Castañeda (2007): "The set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that lay upon two basic ideas: on one side, the polarization of the sexes, namely a counterposition of the masculine and the feminine which, according to it they are not only different but mutually exclusive. On the other hand,

the superiority of the masculine in the areas considered as important for the men. From this standpoint, the machismo involves a series of definitions on the meaning of what a man and a woman ought to be, as well as an entire life style based on that" (p.26).

Among the good things that I can see in Holland, there is the security that, well yet things may happen but never like in Mexico! Therefore, the security that the children can go out and ride a bike or walk alone without something bad happening to them gives you peace. (Adela, 37)

With respect to what the female interviewees saw as the worst aspect of living in the Netherlands, this seemed to be the weather. Due to weather conditions, some of them affirmed to have changed their lifestyles, which, according to them, makes adapting to the Netherlands even more difficult. Esmeralda (27), for instance, expresses this in the following manner: “The worst thing is the weather! In Mexico my life was more outside and here I am most of the times at home, yeah, I miss things.”

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“When Dutch men were asked whether they believe that their Mexican partners are better off in the Netherlands, the answer from all of them was no”

Others expressed difficulties with integrating.

Integration, people are not as open as they are in other countries. They keep stigmatizing you as ‘the foreigner’ and they will never end up integrating you. Also the fact of not being able to find a job, I didn’t expect that. (Malena, 38)

Language was also found to be a major disadvantage for all Mexican women. It was the main obstacle in increasing their Dutch networks and socializing with Dutch people. These findings are in line with Choi et al.’s (2012) argument

that female marriage migrants are more vulnerable to social isolation compared to local women.

When Dutch men were asked to reflect on the living situation of their Mexican partners, and whether they believed that their partners were better off in the Netherlands, strikingly, all of them answered with no.

At this moment not. You have to understand, my partner is a professor, and she is doing here the post. Bah! That is one thing that I can see it is not good. But the thing is that, in her occupation she needs to learn the Dutch language and in the moment that she is having that, yeah, there are more possibilities, that's the thing. (Johan, 33)

At this moment...not. Because she is definitely gone backwards in her development as a professional. She is a psychologist and she is now in the initial stages, she is starting, because it is very complicated here with the health system that we have here in the NL. So, that's a huge challenge, definitely. So, in terms of work no, it is a step backwards. (Hendrik, 33)

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Undoubtedly, the lack of professional development and possibilities to enter the Dutch labour market was an important factor to reflect upon regarding the situation of their Mexican partners.

*The position of Mexican women in the Dutch labour market*

Mexican women's participation in the Dutch labour market was pointed out by the participants as one of the most problematic aspects of their relationship. All of the participants had attended university, some of them had a master's degree, and the majority had considerably good jobs in Mexico. However, for many the latter changed after migrating to the Netherlands. This concern was expressed several times during the interviews.

I do not work. I have never worked here. And now, with my small children it's really difficult. I wanted to work in a school as a teacher but in order to do that first there is a series of requirements such as validating your degree from Mexico and, again now while rearing the kids I have no time nor energy... and well, to be honest Dutch men would rather keep you at home because once you decide to go out, he has to pay for a nanny or a kindergarten. There are transportation costs when you go to work bah! That is very expensive! (Adela, 37)

According to Kofman (2000), the migration of women has also been accompanied by “de-skilling”<sup>xii</sup>; issues such as racial discrimination in the foreign labour market that may lead to badly-paid and low-skilled positions, or even unemployment. As a result, some immigrant women have opted for setting up their own businesses (Phizaclea & Ram, 1996; in Kofman, 2000). This possibility seemed appealing to Maricruz (31), who stated that she is “very desperate about not having a job and about not finding suitable vacancies [...] the next step is [maybe] to do everything by myself, start with my own practice, out of the Dutch system.”

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One of the final questions of the interview read as follows: if you could, which aspect of your life in the Netherlands would you like to change or improve? The majority replied that this was their professional life, confirming that this is one of the most problematic areas faced by the Mexican love migrants living in the Netherlands.

### *What keeps these women in the Netherlands?*

The final question asked to the female respondents was what keeps them in the Netherlands. For many, one word

<sup>xii</sup> De-Skilling a worker is the imbalanced situation between the educational level of a worker (high) and the type of work (s)he is doing (very

low or where educational capital isn't necessary). See also Mojab (1999) who refers specifically to the issue of de-skilling immigrant women.

sufficed to give an answer: love. Esmeralda's (27) answer, for instance, was the following: "[m]y partner, definitely. Or else I would have probably left already."

## "I am very desperate about not having a job"

However, some of them contemplated aspects of their lives in the Netherlands other than only love; these include the previously mentioned security, stability, employment benefits of their partners, and opportunity to travel.

In this regard, it appears that a combination of the love – that they explicitly claim to feel for their Dutch partners – and other factors such as stability and security, affects the decision to stay in the Netherlands. Noticeably, only one out of eight women said that she would remain in the Netherlands with or without her partner.

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### Perspectives on this type of relationship

Finally, both the Mexican women and their Dutch partners were asked to reflect generally on their relationship. Bastiaan's statement is exemplary of how some of the Dutch men felt about their relationships:

I think for the Mexican women living in Mexico it is yeah, sometimes hard to be with a Mexican guy, they have a different style of living than Dutch guys and Dutch guys are very plain, what you see is what you get; yeah, they are structured and they give you your freedom let's say. (Bastiaan, 32)

The Mexican women were particularly asked about what they consider important in their relationships. Some of

them emphasized their professional development as an important factor for success in their relationship and not losing independence.

I would say that it is not easy. There are two aspects, one aspect is, you are with the one you love and that is what gives you strength every day. That is what I came for, and that is what motivates me. But the other aspect is rather complicated. (Araceli, 34)

The majority of them acknowledged that they had to make a big sacrifice for the success of their relationship, the migration process being part of this sacrifice.

## Discussion and Final Remarks

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The present qualitative study aimed to explore the motivations of Mexican women and Dutch men to engage in a relationship that leads to Mexican women migrating to the Netherlands, as well as to identify the main themes behind their experiences, based to their own perceptions. It especially focused on studying Mexican women, and what they see as challenges, advantages and disadvantages of this type of migration. A more in-depth study involving a larger sample and multiple ethnographic techniques over a longer period of time is necessary to understand whether (or why) the number of this kind of couples is increasing. Furthermore, it is necessary to deepen the study to include the various aspects concerning the initial settlement of these Mexican women in the Netherlands. Therefore, it is important to highlight that these final remarks refer exclusively to a selected sample of 8 couples. That is to say, the conclusions drawn are not necessarily applicable to all Mexican women living in the Netherlands with Dutch partners, neither to all Dutch men currently living with a Mexican partner.

In studying the relation between gender and the decision to migrate, Pedraza (1991), talks about the links and in-

tersections between the micro and macro spheres at the moment of migration. The Mexican author Correa Castro (2009) points to educational background, gender inequalities and machismo as factors that influence Mexican women's experience, and their decision to migrate.

**“In Mexico, women still earn significantly less than men do and they are still subject to segregation, sex discrimination and harassment”**

Nowadays in Mexico, despite increased levels of employment of women, the patriarchal structure is being challenged, since, women “still earn significantly less than men do and they are still subject to segregation and sex discrimination and harassment” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, p. 12). Sexual infidelity is another indicator of patriarchal gender relations; it may be tolerated and even normalized when done by Mexican men but not by Mexican women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

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It is worth to raise the question, however, of whether Dutch men are seen as machistas<sup>xiii</sup> by their Mexican partners. The Mexican respondents attributed certain characteristics to Dutch partners that can generally be considered contrary to machismo, such as loyalty, tolerance, emotional stability and egalitarian values. However, the reports by the Dutch men indicate a sort of contradiction with respect to the lack of machismo attributed to them. Some of them appreciated having a Mexican partner whom they perceive as more caring, less individualistic and somehow less independent than Dutch women: a care giver family-oriented woman.

They do give the Dutch women credit for being so liberated, but at the same time many of them expressed to not feel very attracted to that characteristic of individualism Dutch women seem to possess.

One of the most important findings drawn from this study – in contrast to popular opinion and past inferences in the literature – is that in the case of this specific sample of Mexican women, economic gain did not seem to apply. One explanation is that these women all had access to university education at home, which, only people with middle class status can afford in Mexico. The great majority had been in Europe before on vacation, lived in urban areas, reported to come from a family where at least one of the parents had a good job and income, and, in most cases,

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“Despite their educational credentials, and prior professional experience many Mexican women remain unemployed in the Netherlands”

had good jobs themselves in Mexico. Reflecting upon their current living situation in the Netherlands, none of the Mexican women affirmed to have improved her social or economic status. On the contrary, many of the couples lived with only one salary, that of the Dutch partner; this seemed to be a big disadvantage for the Mexican women who were used to working and earning their own money in Mexico. Some of them affirmed they would have left if they were no longer with their partners, or that they had

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<sup>xiii</sup> Machistas are persons who believe and exercise male superiority in daily life. For example: “I do not cry because I am a man”, or “Men do not

cook, that is not masculine, women should do that.” are examples of sentences typically used by machistas.

the hope to go back to Mexico in the future for this reason. All of them except for one expressed that love – and not economic gains – was the main reason to stay.

Additionally, this study has showed that many of the Mexican participants share a common problematic: the lack of a professional life in the Netherlands. Requirements such as being able to speak Dutch and having to legalize their degrees, or their incompatibility (for example having a degree in teaching Mexican history), among others, have caused difficulties with accessing the Dutch labour market. In this context, it should be emphasized that the participants in the study were all highly educated women. For those who are unemployed, this has also contributed to experiencing social isolation in their homes. This aspect comes to problematize the question of whether traditional Mexican ways of patriarchy vanish in the Netherlands, or continue to be reproduced by couples of Dutch men and Mexican women, due to economic dependency of some Mexican women on their Dutch partners.

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Moreover, Dutch partners reported to have been just as involved as their partners in the process of immigration and integration of their partners. Besides the economic investments to make the partnership possible (such as buying a house), Dutch partners admitted that there is a bigger investment of time and attention to their Mexican partners, compared to the Dutch partners they had before. They reported to be aware of the fact that they need to be extra supportive for their partners, in order to help them settle down and start their lives in the Netherlands.

Finally, in the case of the couples presently studied, it seems that the Mexican migrant women had to give up many things in order to be with the partner they love. According to what the participants reported, the parties that seemed to carry the major burden of sacrifice are the Mexican women.

In my case if everything I am living now is the high price that I have to pay in order to be with my husband, I would do it over again, I am deeply in love with my husband. (Linda, 34)

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