

# Migrant women's empowerment in the city



It is international women's day today and the world's women are on the move like never before: [according to figures from the International Institute for Migration, women constitute 49% of the world's 214 million transnational migrants](#). It is often assumed that transnational migration is empowering to women, particularly if their destination country is one where women enjoy greater levels of gender equality than they do in their country of origin.

[Donna Butorac's PhD study of the experiences of women moving to Australia](#) shows that the story is not that simple. Migration resulted in the re-establishment of more traditional gender roles for her participants. In her cohort of highly-educated skilled and business migrants, women who had established themselves as successful professionals or businesswomen pre-migration were turned into stay-at-home housewives and mothers in Australia. This was due to the way that visa procedures defined them as secondary to a man, their husband, and also due to barriers to re-entry into the workforce.

Research published in the latest issue of [Sociological Forum](#) adds a further piece to the puzzle of migrant women's experiences of autonomy (or lack thereof). Focussing on Mexican migrant women in the USA with low socioeconomic post-migration status, "[The relational context of migration](#)" explores their experiences of autonomy inside and outside the home in three distinct locations.

The first research site, an urban neighbourhood in New Jersey, is characterized by a high density of Mexican immigrants and the availability of bilingual social services within walking distance or distances accessible by public transport. The second research site is a suburban context in Ohio, where Mexican migrants live in relative isolation from each other, the availability of social services in Spanish is more limited and the ability to drive and access to a private vehicle are a prerequisite for mobility. Finally, the third research site is in rural Montana, characterized by the inaccessibility of social services, by rugged terrain and great distances.

The experiences of the women and, the relationship between autonomy inside and outside the home, differed across the three sites.

In New Jersey, women were mobile outside the home, even if they had unsupportive or even abusive husbands. Many of them worked outside the home and they were actively involved in their children's schooling because communication was always in English and Spanish. Access to a large network of co-ethnics meant that emotional and practical support was available in case of difficult family situations.

In Ohio, the situation was quite different. There the women were dependent on good relationships with their husband in order to be autonomous in the public sphere. In the absence of social networks, public transport and bilingual services, autonomy outside the home was dependent on autonomy inside the home. Women with unsupportive husbands were largely stuck, such as one woman who was keen to attend ESL classes in order to become more mobile. However, the roundtrip from her trailer home to the ESL class took four hours on public transport. Additionally, that transport ordeal was difficult to fit into the children's school schedule.

In Montana, finally, Mexican women found themselves in a difficult situation no matter how supportive or otherwise their husbands were. Living in relative isolation, even grocery shopping was difficult for some. Not only was driving in the rugged terrain more difficult than in urban and suburban environments but Mexicans driving in Montana also attracted police attention. Being pulled over for a traffic check was more than a hassle: it was associated with the omnipresent fear of deportation for those without any legal status. In these precarious conditions, many participants were afraid even to leave the house and anything requiring any kind of external support, such as illness, could quickly degenerate into a major disaster.

The unique comparative study by Joana Dreby and Leah Schmalzbauer described here contributes to our understanding of the role of human geography in the settlement experiences of migrant women. Additionally, it provides a novel perspective on ethnic enclaves. [Much maligned in immigration debates as encouraging segregation](#), they may actually provide the very environment for migrant women's empowerment!



Dreby, J., & Schmalzbauer, L. (2013). The Relational Contexts of Migration: Mexican Women in New Destination Sites Sociological Forum, 28 (1), 1-26 DOI: [10.1111/socf.12000](https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12000)