Drawing on structural and life-cycle perspectives and a limited body of literature, this article explores the obstacle of illegal status to expanding views of self, the more equitable gender roles in marriage, and the mothering responsibilities for young working-class women from rural Mexico who have settled in rural communities and small towns in the United States. Strengths related to the Mexican culture and risks and opportunities accompanying migration in young adulthood are examined within this framework.

**Keywords:** adult development; immigrant women; migration

In recent years predominantly rural states, especially those in the Southeast, have experienced a dramatic increase in the Latino population (Schmid, 2003). Comprised largely of undocumented Mexicans from rural, agrarian areas who have been in the United States five years or fewer (Cortina, 2005; Lacey, 2004), these new arrivals are often young; have few years of schooling and a low proficiency in English; and are employed in low-skill, low-paying jobs (Marotta & Garcia, 2003). About 48% of Mexican immigrants are women (*NC Latino Health, 2003*), typically married or in a “union libre” (Rees, 2001).

Although there are exceptions, male dominance and an exclusive focus on domestic duties tend to characterize the lives of working-class wives in Mexico, especially those in rural areas (Aysa & Massey, 2004). For these women, migration to the United States presents opportunities to develop a more complex, transnational self that is better positioned to gain access to resources outside the family and to participate more fully in decision making within the family system regarding the allocation of resources. Trueba (2002) observed that the nature of this enhanced self is that of multiple identities that Latinas can capitalize on to promote family mobility and stability. He further stated that crossing ethnic lines to strengthen ties to formal resources beyond the family and ethnic community does not deprive immigrants of “their quintessential selves and the security of the home culture” (p. 10).

Settlement in a rural region in interaction with subordinate positions in structural categories of race/ethnicity, social class, and gender are factors that can greatly limit opportunities for newly arrived, young, low-income Mexican immigrant women. Undocumented status is another structural variable that compounds these disadvantages. In fact, immigration status is such an essential determinant of an immigrant’s opportunities that those who are in this country illegally can be considered to be in a different and much less advantageous category than those with legal standing (Hirsch, 2002).

Given the centrality of legal status in the settlement experiences of undocumented low-income, low-skilled Mexican immigrant women, it is important to highlight how this factor is played out in the women’s daily lives. Drawing on the structural and life-cycle
perspectives and a limited body of literature on this topic, this article explores the obstacle of illegal status to expanding views of self, more equitable gender roles in marriage, and mothering responsibilities for young working-class women from rural Mexico who have settled in rural communities and small towns of the United States. Resiliencies afforded by the culture of origin and risks that are associated with life cycle–related changes that accompany migration are considered within this framework. Suggestions are made for enhancing the life circumstances of undocumented Mexican women through the provision of services and the reform of immigration policy that recognizes the women’s contributions to this society and safeguards the women’s human rights.

Self-identity and Migration

In dominant mainstream U.S. society, women are expected in young adulthood, in varying degrees based on class and race, to achieve an autonomous identity, pursue a career path, and learn to nurture others while simultaneously caring for themselves. In rural Mexico, rather than moving toward greater personal autonomy toward the end of adolescence, young working-class women typically have internalized the expectation that the family will be the central focus of their lives (Fontes, 2002) and the basis for the survival of the unit’s members (Baca Zinn, 1999). This perspective of self as undifferentiated from the family unit was validated empirically, in part, by Guendelman, Malin, Herr-Harthorn, and Vargas (2001), who found that, among working-class wives aged 18–35 who were residing in either rural or urban Mexico, self was defined by one’s spouse and by internalized norms of what a woman’s role should be within the family.

Migration and settlement present a challenge to an identity established in the country of origin and an opportunity to reshape that identity in the adopted culture. For newly arrived young immigrant women, adaptation requires some plasticity while they consider new options and retain the strengths and ties of their culture of origin (Ainslie, 2001). The results of this process for immigrant Mexican women can be a more complex, more highly differentiated self that incorporates influences and resources from the adopted culture but maintains a firm footing in the culture of origin.

Guendelman et al. (2001) interviewed low-income Mexican immigrant women who were living in both rural and urban areas of the United States and who had immigrated five or fewer years earlier, to determine if their self-concept differed from that of the working-class women in Mexico whom they had also interviewed. They found that both the rural and urban immigrant women displayed a grasp of an individual self as expressed through dreams, hopes, and plans for personal development and achievement. The life plans of these women reflected processes of individuation that were not seen in their counterparts in Mexico. Nonetheless, educational barriers, transportation difficulties, and economic limitations made it difficult for the women, especially those residing in rural areas, to act on their visions.

In keeping with the women’s culture-of-origin values, gaining awareness of an individual self with personal agency did not diminish a strong family orientation. Nor did the number of years the women had lived in the United States weaken their view of the family as being a priority in their lives. Newfound personal opportunities were regarded as avenues to enhancing family well-being rather than to achieving higher levels of individual autonomy and independence (Guendelman et al., 2001).
Transformation of Self, Support Services, and Immigration Status

Access to social, economic, and educational resources is an important determinant of the development of newly arrived low-skilled Mexican women. However, opportunities to act on expanded views of self are not equal for all immigrant women because legal status structures settlement experiences differently. Various immigration statuses imply different access to benefits, services, and legal rights. Unlike legal permanent residence, which entitles one to a “green card” and provides a route to naturalized citizenship, undocumented status typically does not lead to legal citizenship. Although special amnesty programs may provide an avenue through which undocumented workers can attain legal standing, these programs are offered sporadically; have favored men; and as currently structured are expensive, often beyond the reach of low-income working-class families (Hirsch, 2002).

Under the provisions of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, undocumented status bars immigrant women from governmental support programs such Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, food stamps, and medical care, except in emergencies (Romero, 2003)—resources that could be used to enhance personal agency. In addition to the unremitting fear of deportation, undocumented women are hemmed in by increasingly stringent requirements that block them from legal personhood, including obtaining a driver’s license, a bank account, or a credit history. For Mexican immigrant women who reside in the predominantly rural state of Georgia, for example, getting a driver’s license requires traveling to a neighboring state—an event more burdensome for women than for men, who have networks that are more suited to this purpose (Hirsch, 2002).

It has been suggested that newly arrived immigrant women are best assisted when formal supports and educational services are provided early in the migration-settlement process. Essential supports and services for recently arrived immigrant women include access to classes to improve their English-language skills, information about the American health and social service systems, education about mental and physical health, advocacy services for women, and links to community resources (Flaskerud & Uman, 1996). Transportation is critical, since newly arrived immigrant women often have no driving experience and have limited opportunities to obtain a driver’s license.

The obstacles raised by illegal status are likely felt more acutely by undocumented immigrant women who settle in rural receiving communities, where they are at a greater risk of geographic and social isolation, governmental services are fewer, and private-sector supports are scarcer than in urban centers. These realities mean that rural service providers must take the initiative in creating and coordinating services, both within and outside traditional governmental structures, to help undocumented Mexican immigrant women obtain needed resources, including transportation services. Public information in Spanish and outreach to inform immigrant women of local opportunities, especially when undertaken by Latinas with similar class backgrounds and legal statuses, are germane to the success of these efforts.

Gender Relations, Migration, and Legal Status

In her examination of gender-role changes in the migration process, Pessar (1999) concluded that there is broad agreement that immigrant women tend to make personal gains in the marital relationship as a result of migration. On the basis of her ethnographic study of
working-class women in rural sending communities of Mexico and their counterparts in receiving communities in the United States, Hirsch (2000) demonstrated that some of the relaxing of traditional gender boundaries actually begins in the premigratory stage. The young women in her study who anticipated migration tended to push assertively for more companionate-based marriages that tolerated some level of disagreement and were based on mutual trust and sexual intimacy rather than an emphasis on reproduction and unilateral respect—values that are associated with traditional patriarchy. Hirsch attributed these changes, in part, to transnational influences on sending communities that are brought about by patterns of out-migration and return visits by Mexicans residing in the United States.

Upon migration, the increase in autonomy and personal power realized by the working-class wives in Hirsch’s (2002) study depended on a combination of factors, including the stage of marriage; networks; personality characteristics; and a variety of structural influences, of which immigration status was foremost. Undocumented Mexican women who were in relationships with men with legal status were at a decided disadvantage, since they became more, rather than less, dependent after they had migrated. For some women in companionate marriages, their undocumented status heightened their vulnerability to abandonment if sexual desires shifted and their husbands became involved in new liaisons following migration (Hirsch, 2000).

**Gender-Role Changes, Paid Employment, and Legal Status**

Working outside the home is one avenue through which Mexican immigrant women gain more personal autonomy and independence, while men generally experience this change as a loss of interpersonal power (Pessar, 1999). The positive outcomes of paid work include greater decision making in budgeting, managing household finances, and planning family recreational activities (Harvey, Beckman, Browner, & Sherman, 2002). Generally speaking, the smaller the wage gap, the more equality exists in the relationship (Pessar, 1999).

Twice as many Mexican immigrant women as Anglo women suffer from underemployment or intermittent unemployment (De Anda, 2005). An important influence on employment opportunities is immigrant status. Oppression that is based on racial/ethnic, class, gender, and legal status blocks avenues to more gainful employment and opportunities for advancement, especially in the formal sector. Undocumented Mexican women in urban areas may have better employment opportunities in the informal arena in such jobs as nannies and housekeepers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997), but access to these jobs may be more severely restricted for nonnative rural residents.

Often jobs available to undocumented women in rural communities are in the subsistence-wage areas of agriculture and in poultry-, hog-, and frozen food–processing plants and canneries, where the work can be dangerous, potentially debilitating because of heavy repetitive motion, and physically draining. These jobs typically are not covered by safety regulations, and undocumented women are not protected from the consequences of injury by workman’s compensation or disability insurance (Guthey, 2001). Obstacles to obtaining better jobs and advancement on the job include state and local educational policies that bar undocumented residents from enrolling in community colleges and technical programs (Cortina, 2005).

It appears that Mexican immigrant women associate the newfound freedoms that many of them gain when they become paid workers not with feminist ideology but with helping their families progress (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). On the basis of her review of the literature,
Pessar (1999, p. 66) observed that there is no evidence among first-generation immigrant women of a “radical revamping of gender ideology and lines of authority or leaving the husband,” despite rates of participation in the labor force that are equal to those of the native population. She concluded that immigrant women have only “nibbled at the margins of patriarchy” (p. 66) and that gender hierarchy may not be the most important determinant in their lives, since other forms of structural oppression, such as class, race/ethnicity, and legal status, have greater consequence for the women’s day-to-day lives.

### Couple Conflict, Violence, and Undocumented Status

Relationship conflict is a risk factor in shifting gender relations and a strong indicator of the potential for abuse of Mexican immigrant women. Research has indicated that when there is marital disagreement, dominating immigrant husbands resort to physical violence as a means of resolving conflict and, paradoxically, of “keeping the peace” (Aldarondo, Kaufman, & Jasinski, 2002). It is not surprising that a wife’s engagement in paid employment outside the home is strongly associated with domestic violence among immigrant Mexican couples (Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana, 2004).

Men’s unemployment is closely associated with incidences of domestic violence in Mexican immigrant couples (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002). When husbands are unemployed, some wives may continue to carry the responsibility of the housework as well as work outside the home so as not to undermine their husbands’ symbolic position of power and thus to avoid conflict (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Heavy drinking (Murdaugh et al., 2004) and poverty (Cunradi et al., 2002) also have been found to increase the risk of wife abuse in Mexican couples.

Circumstances surrounding abused immigrant women often render the problem of domestic violence difficult to address and remedy. Undocumented status, including fear that the major breadwinner will be deported, and limited English-language skills may prevent women from seeking help (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Murdaugh et al., 2004). In addition, undocumented Mexican immigrant women in rural areas, who are at a greater risk of isolation from supportive networks, may be more reluctant to report abuse than their urban sisters (Lown & Vega, 2003).

Although the 1994 Violence Against Women Act and its 2000 modification protect from deportation undocumented immigrant women who have been victims of domestic violence, the courts have been unclear about what constitutes abuse, and the process is rigid and difficult to navigate (Goldman, 1999). Also, as Menjivar and Salcido (2002) observed, it is the very involvement of the police and the law that often serves to keep the abused immigrant woman in the violent situation. An undocumented immigrant woman may be arrested once the police are called even if she acted in self-defense.

Institutional supports that are provided to native victims of domestic violence may be inappropriate or irrelevant for poor immigrant women in similar circumstances. Pointing out that current delivery systems are focused on helping women leave partners and live independently, Yoshioka and Choi (2005) called for a continuum of domestic violence–treatment services that includes eliminating the violence and keeping the family together, since many immigrant women do not have the values or the resources to consider divorce, single parenthood, or living independently. Unfortunately, rural communities and small towns often lack the resources and direction for reaching out to undocumented immigrant women in this specialized manner.
Mothering

Being a mother is regarded in Mexican culture as an integral part of a woman’s identity (Tiano & Ladino, 1999). Mexican immigrant women who are in committed relationships become mothers at earlier ages than do Anglo women (Callister & Birkhead, 2002). All the women in Guendelman et al.’s (2001) study, whether living in Mexico or in the United States, considered life without children to be empty and lonely. Women who resided in Mexico and Mexican immigrant women in rural U.S. areas believed that children not only defined their lives but also served to preserve marital harmony.

In rural Mexico, poor women are expected to stay home after their children are born and to attend exclusively to child care responsibilities. Orientation to motherhood, however, may change with migration, especially for working-class women who have new opportunities to enter the paid labor force and need to work to help support their families (Guendelman et al., 2001). The Mexican immigrant women in Segura’s (1991) study of motherhood and work viewed paid employment as an important avenue toward helping their children and expressed no guilt about being working mothers.

Motherhood and Illegal Status

Illegal status can have a profound impact on undocumented Mexican mothers and their children in a variety of ways. One area is prenatal care. Although Mexican immigrant women have more favorable pregnancy outcomes than do women in any other ethnic or racial group, they still make fewer visits for prenatal care and wait longer for the initial visit (Bender & Castro, 2000).

More than two thirds of undocumented Mexican women lack health insurance (Romero, 2003). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 made Medicaid coverage inaccessible to undocumented women except for emergency medical health care, including labor and delivery. Under the guidelines of “presumptive eligibility,” women with illegal status can receive time-limited coverage for prenatal care, but they may be reluctant to provide the personal information that is needed to qualify for this care (NC Latino Health, 2003).

Under a retroactive provision of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, if an undocumented single mother has been convicted—even years ago as a child in the United States—of certain crimes, including shoplifting, she can be deported. This act leaves her U.S.-born children without supervision and in the care of the child welfare system. Her Mexico-born children may be subjected to deportation along with their mother or left to the care of the system. In this punitive situation, family separation is stressed over family unity (Pine & Drachman, 2005). To compound this hardship, child welfare departments in some rural counties are only beginning to recruit Spanish-speaking foster families and, out of necessity, may be forced to place Hispanic children in “English-only” situations (Hancock, 2005). The language and cultural orientations that are acquired in long-term placements may block the potential reunification of children with mothers who may eventually return to the United States or with extended family members who arrive in the United States some years later.

Mixed-status families are those in which some children in the unit are citizens and other children are not. This family structure can lead to “inequality among children and divisiveness in the family, because citizen children have the same rights and service eligibility as
other U.S. children, while their undocumented siblings do not” (Pine & Drachman, 2005, p. 543). Children who have the sniffles may be taken right away to the doctor, while others are taken only if they are very ill, depending on who has legal status and Medicaid coverage. These circumstances create additional stressors for low-income undocumented immigrant mothers who are socialized to emphasize the importance of the collective well-being of their families but who have to treat their children differently, depending on their children’s citizenship status (Hirsch, 2002).

School administrators and teachers view parental involvement in children’s education as fundamental to children’s success in school. Undocumented mothers may be reluctant to enter their children’s schools because of the authority that the institution represents and thus may be viewed as uncaring and uninvolved (Fontes, 2002). This is also true of other settings in which parental involvement is required for strengthening family ties to educational, social, and recreational resources for immigrant children in the community. Limited transportation in rural communities compounds the difficulty of carrying out parenting responsibilities in these and other areas, including seeking medical attention for one’s children.

Some writers and researchers have encouraged child welfare, public health, and educational institutions to be more responsive to the needs and life circumstances of undocumented mothers. For example, Valdes (1996) called for schools to examine the biased manner in which undocumented immigrant mothers are regarded. Pine and Drachman (2005) provided an overview of the ways in which child welfare workers can more competently anticipate and address issues that arise for parents and children as a result of immigration status. In the public health realm, Burk, Wieser, and Keegan (1995) stressed the need for flexibility in providing prenatal care to low-income immigrant women, for whom the cost of care outside this system is prohibitive.

### Conclusion

One potential outcome of migration for working-class women from rural communities of Mexico is a more complex, more highly differentiated, self that is better positioned to participate in the allocation of resources inside the family and to gain access to resources beyond the system so as to advance their families. In examining how these changes unfold throughout the life-cycle events of the young adulthood of new arrivals, it is important to consider how geographic and structural factors affect this process. Such an analysis must include the overarching importance of legal status in the lives of undocumented Mexican women, as well as the rural and small-town environments in which many are settling.

Some suggestions were made for policies and practices that could ease the transition of the migratory experience and assist undocumented Mexican women to gain access to resources and services to improve their lives and strengthen their families. Notwithstanding, the structural problems that these women face require solutions that go beyond the social service system. What is needed is a comprehensive reform of immigration policy that is aimed less at punitive, restrictive measures to control the flow and liberties of immigrants and more at integrating illegal immigrants who are already in the United States and are actively contributing to the functioning of this society.

It is disturbing that much of the national debate of late has emphasized a security- and enforcement-oriented response to the issue of the growing immigrant population. Recently debated federal legislation that would allow any state to deny driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants could have an extremely negative impact on Mexican women in rural
areas and would slow their progress (“Driving Test,” 2005). Even harsher in its import is an immigrant reform bill, passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2005, that would make having an illegal presence in the United States a felony and would turn almost 2 million immigrant children into felons (Moscoso, 2005).

The sentiment underlying these containment ideas is understandable, to some extent, in light of the events of September 11, 2001, and subsequent terrorist attacks around the world. However, fears about security and a bent toward punishment must be offset with a concern for human rights and civil liberties that would allow law-abiding undocumented immigrants to acquire skills, education, credit, driver’s licenses, insurance, decent wages, and other tools of our culture that are fundamental to personal and family success. From this perspective, social work efforts to enhance the personal agency of undocumented Mexican women in rural communities are synonymous with the promotion of the women’s human rights and society’s recognition of these rights.

From a human rights perspective, babies and children, including those whose parents are undocumented, require caretakers, usually mothers, to ensure their health and well-being. One alternative that could greatly improve the ability of undocumented Mexican women to care for themselves and their families is the extension of naturalized citizenship to immigrant women with children who were born in the United States. Allowing undocumented immigrant women to become citizens in this manner would empower them to care for their families from a position of strength and would recognize the contributions they are making to their families, rural communities, and the society at large.

Obviously, a combination of strategies is required at various levels and sectors of the society to ameliorate the harsh consequences of illegal status for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. Social workers need to be well informed of the legal, political, and economic issues that affect the well-being of this population, as well as the limitations and challenges that are imposed by rural environments. They also need to act as advocates to protect the human rights of low-income undocumented Mexican immigrant women and search for creative ways to advance the quality of the women’s lives and the lives of their families.

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