

# Emotional Proletarians In A Global Economy: Mexican Immigrant Women And Elder Care Work

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**ABSTRACT:** Through the ethnographic case of Santa Barbara, California I focus on Mexican immigrant women employed as elder care workers in private homes. In particular, I examine the care narratives of Mexicanas who labor with little or no supervision from anyone other than their wards. These narratives reveal that workers undertake a broad range of unrecognized emotional efforts such as facial and bodily displays, tone of voice and spoken word, and more significantly, empathy and long-term strategic choices. These types of emotional labor stand in sharp contrast to those performed by the prototypical “emotional proletarians” of the academic literature and suggest that there is a new, more flexible type of emotional proletarian in the global economy, one whose skills involve providing authentic emotion.

I have known elderly persons who have no one, and I see them as abandoned persons. There is more of a need for caring than cleaning [in society]. But not just anyone can do it. It requires mind and body; it requires that you give order to the day. And it is very

difficult work, because you also have to put yourself in that person's place. You have to encourage them and try to understand them.

Guadalupe Martinez, September 2000

When Guadalupe, a private elder care provider in Santa Barbara, California explains why she stays in a low paid caring job rather than finding higher paid employment as a housecleaner, she says it is because there is a greater social need for this work in a city where so many elderly citizens live alone. As a recent immigrant who has had to leave her own family behind in Mexico, the state of being old and alone is to her mind very poignant. She also recognizes, however, that not everyone is cut out for elder care. From her point of view caring for the frail elderly is difficult and skilled work; it is not something natural to her. Rather Guadalupe argues that elder care requires that she create her own routine in which forethought, physical dexterity, and a broad range of "emotional labors" are central, all in exchange for \$600 a month.

Guadalupe's circumstance is far from unique. Increasingly, immigrant women are hired by employers in the United States to labor as elder care providers in private homes (Chang 2000; Abel 2000). This represents a dramatic change in the way Americans care for their elderly kin, a change that reflects a number of late 20th century developments. Globalization and alterations in ideologies about family and gender have contributed to the unprecedented feminization of the waged labor force in the last 30 years (Sassen-Koob 1988). Consequently, due to both necessity and choice, millions of women are no longer the primary caregivers for their children or adult kin, which was the case in most American households during most of the 20th century. At the same time, men have not filled the household labor vacuum. Rather, more than at any other time in history, families turn to the market to purchase a broad range of goods and services necessary for the physical

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and emotional care of people. These goods and services range from prepared meals and disposable diapers to time in child, elderly and/or convalescent care centers. In many cities individuals also hire immigrant women to perform the work that they are too tired, too busy or simply unwilling to do themselves (Ruiz 1987; Solorzano-Torres 1987; Repak 1995; Mahler 1995; Wrigley 1995).

Globalization processes also help explain why it is that immigrant women from developing countries clean and care for the citizens of post-industrial nations (Enloe 1989). Since the 1970s the Third World's embrace of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on production for export, coupled with structural adjustment programs, have fomented the increased south-to-north migration of women who are fleeing the traumatic consequences of these economic and political policies (Zlotnik 1995). This is particularly the case for Mexican women who, alongside Mexican men, represent the largest group of immigrants to the U. S. through the 1980s and 1990s (Gutiérrez 1998). Once in the U. S., Mexican women (like many recent migrants from Central America, the West Indies, and the Philippines) find limited labor market choices and are in essence tracked into low paying jobs (Fernández-Kelly and Sassen 1995), especially domestic employment (Salzinger 1991). Thus, one of the consequences of globalization is a boom in the supply and demand for immigrant domestics, a phenomenon that contrasts with the post-WW II period when the low number of domestic workers had led some academics to predict the demise of the occupation (Milkman et al. 1998).

Not surprisingly, recent anthropological and sociological research has focused on the expansion of the domestic labor market in the United States. Scholars have shed light on the transnational and stratified structure of the occupation (Colen 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001), the broad range of physical tasks undertaken by domestics (Sanjek and Colen 1990), the importance of worker agency in shaping the labor

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