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by

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**Ni Domésticas Ni Putas: Sexual Harassment in the Lives of Female
Household Workers in Monterrey, Nuevo León**

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**Ni Domésticas Ni Putas: Sexual Harassment in the Lives of Female
Household Workers in Monterrey, Nuevo León**

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Thesis

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Dedication

To Enrique, Juan Camilo and the more than 50,000 victims of drug related violence in
Mexico.

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Abstract

Ni Domésticas Ni Putas: Sexual Harassment in the Lives of Female Household Workers in Monterrey, Nuevo León

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Sexual violence and in particular sexual harassment is an unfortunate reality in the lives of millions of Mexican women. We encounter this problem in all areas of our life: on the streets, within our families, and at work. Interestingly, some women's experiences of sexual harassment are less visible than others. This is the case of women in the occupation of paid household work. In Mexico, the fact that women household workers are sexually harassed or raped by their male employers has been silenced and at best kept as an open secret. In addition, researchers who have studied the lives of household workers barely mention it. Consequently, this master's thesis answers the following research questions: (1) Are women domestic workers vulnerable to sexual harassment? Why? and, (2) What are the social and cultural factors responsible for such

vulnerabilities? I engage with these research questions by exploring the life histories of 11 women from Monterrey, Nuevo León and who have at least 5 years of working experience in the occupation, through in-depth interviews. Based on what the women shared with me I offer a collection of individual life stories followed by a feminist informed analysis of their experiences. Each story is unique and presents their views and perceptions of sexual harassment in the occupation and elsewhere. The analysis is divided in five mayor themes, which emerged in all of the interviews and explain the problematic. Although they enter the occupation knowing there are potential risks, one of which is sexual harassment, they are unable to change occupations due to limited work options. I argue that their social positionalities stemming from their gender, race, and class puts these women in a vulnerable position vis-a-vis their employers. As working class women, some from indigenous backgrounds, their employers engage in different types of discrimination, all of which construct women household workers as the *other* and their bodies as rapeable. At last, women blame themselves and others who have been targets of sexual harassment while freeing men from any type of accountability.

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Introduction

ON BECOMING A FEMINIST

When I first arrived from Monterrey, Mexico to UT Austin in August 2008 to pursue a Master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies I had a completely different understanding of what feminism meant. I was excited and honestly believed in the uncomplicated notion of "sisterhood is powerful," which was obviously shattered into pieces as I learned more about the history and theory of feminism in the United States and elsewhere. I discovered that feminism is a complex struggle to end oppression and that each person's experience depends on their positionality in terms of class, race, and sexual orientation among other social identifiers. As I thought about a project to work on for my thesis I began reading about the kinds of relationships that develop between household workers who live in Monterrey and the women that hire them.

Although not all employer – domestic worker relationships are abusive, I found that these relationships are commonly characterized by subordination and deference. Domestic workers are subjected to discrimination, exploitation, and violence (i.e. verbal, psychological, and physical). As a result, I struggled to understand the lack of empathy and respect between the housewife representing the employer and the domestic worker offering her paid services to her. If domestic workers make our lives so much easier, and it would be more logical to think that we should be grateful for their work, how can these behaviors and attitudes be explained? Furthermore, if some people consider domestic workers as family members, why isn't there empathy and respect towards them?

I was raised in an upper middle class family in San Pedro, Garza García, which is adjacent to Monterrey, Nuevo León. San Pedro is one of the wealthiest municipalities in the nation and Latin America. I grew up as part of a society in which hiring domestic workers and nannies is very common, so I have extensive experience interacting with domestic workers from an early age in my friends' home as well as my own. Growing up I observed the dynamics that can unfold between women workers and the families they serve. I regretfully learned that domestic workers were there to do almost anything for us - that is, my family and me.

When I was about 15 years old, a woman I will call “Laura” arrived at my parent’s house to work de planta, as a live-in maid with a presumably permanent job. She was slender, short, and indigenous. Although I am not tall, I do not have indigenous features, instead I have fair skin, so I am commonly identified as *blanca* — white — in Mexico. Laura had migrated to Monterrey from a rural area in the state of San Luis Potosí and she began to work for our family when she was an adolescent. We were about the same age. I soon developed a good relationship with her, we used to chat or watch TV together. Unlike other homes I had been to, we had no intercoms or special bells in my parents’ household to call Laura. However, when I needed something done by Laura, I assumed the position of *la hija de la patrona*, the daughter of the housewife: “Laura can you please bring me a glass of lemonade?” Eventually, asking Laura for a lemonade led to further requests like “please bring me my backpack, pick up my room, fix dinner for me and my friends,” and so on.

I will never forget an argument that occurred between Laura and me. I had friends over at my place that day and since I was preoccupied with company, I asked Laura to fix something for all the guests to eat. She took a while to fulfill my request because she was very busy taking care of multiple chores all at once. As a 15-year-old pampered from a very young age, my reaction to the delay was to go downstairs into the kitchen and reprimand Laura for taking too long. It surprised me when Laura talked back to me and said, “We are not the same.” I stood there, speechless, feeling insulted and ashamed all at that same time. Years after the incident, I wondered what she meant that day, however I never asked her to explain. In fact, we have never talked about the incident. Almost 15 years later, I realize she probably meant we could not understand each other because we occupied different subject positions in terms of race and class.

When my mother found out about the situation, she reprimanded me by making it clear that Laura was not there to serve me. She asked me to imagine myself in the position of Laura, a 15 year-old adolescent just like me. Imagining myself in Laura’s position made me recognize and confront my class privilege. I am now aware of the extent to which behaviors like mine and other similar practices towards domestic workers have become normalized and unchallenged in upper middle class families to the most privileged families in the country.

As I read about this topic for my MA thesis, I also started inquiring family members and friends from Monterrey about this possible research topic. In particular, I asked what they thought about abusive working relationships and other aspects that may make women workers vulnerable, including but not limited to the lack of employee

benefits and inadequate legal protection. While I talked informally about such issues, I positioned myself on the side of the worker and questioned unfair practices. Although my relatives and friends recognized that household workers are exposed to a number of unfair practices, most seemed uncomfortable with my questions and they adopted a defensive attitude to justify themselves. For them, protecting their assets and the wellbeing of their family members was much more important than thinking about workers' rights. And so I learned a lesson: It is difficult to challenge the status quo that promotes this type of inequality, especially when it comes to people who are not willing to compromise their privileges.

Monterrey's civil society — *la sociedad regiomontana* — is well known for its generosity in aiding other neighboring states in cases of natural disasters (including but not limited to hurricanes or earthquakes); people can be collectively moved when it comes to natural disasters or other tragedies affecting people in the region or the rest of the country. In these cases, generosity, empathy and human sensibility seem to go hand and hand with a sense of morality of telling people what is “right” to do, actions that might be viewed and judged by others (and God, in the case of religious people). This very same generous and caring society, paradoxically, has become desensitized to the human rights, living conditions, and the general welfare of the historically exploited and marginalized indigenous women and men in the country--this includes people who live in poverty. Although race, gender, and class inequality are not only well rooted in Monterrey, but also the rest of Mexico and other westernized societies, this is one example of the ways in which double standards of morality shape relevant aspects of

social life in Monterrey and the entire nation. These forces seem to be responsible, to some extent, for the perceptions that my friends and families shared with me in our conversations about women employed in household work.

When I talked with acquaintances and friends, some of them used pejorative terms when they talked about the women they hired: *muchacha*, *sirvienta*, *criada*, or *gata* — a female cat, which is perhaps the most pejorative term commonly used to refer to domestic workers. These expressions are significant because each one communicates Mexican society's understandings of domestic work and socially constructed images of the women workers that perform it. In the popular imagination, the domestic worker is a single woman or a *muchacha*. “La *muchacha*” is linguistically the young woman who socially speaking never gets to become an adult, and thus, she can always be under control of an adult in a position of power. Although nowadays few people use the word *sirvienta* to refer to them, this conceptualization is charged with reminiscences of servitude and remembers the times when slaves performed domestic work. In turn, the word *criada* speaks of the practice – possibly still in place – of poor peasants that gave up or sold their female daughters to middle or upper class families to be raised by them. Entering domestic work, either forced or voluntary, also means that the employer family will guide and supervise the women's life. Finally the term *gata* is used to dehumanize these women. A woman who is compared to a cat is closer to being an animal than to being a human being and thus there is a justification to be devalued and disrespected. Regardless of the term people use to refer to women employed in domestic work, all of these concepts construct the image of the domestic worker as a dependent and under aged

woman whose existence revolves around serving the family, and thus being instructed and controlled by the employer and the family.

In my conversations with friends and relatives, I also learned that people do not always know how to explain some traditions surrounding domestic service. I asked my mother, for instance, “How come our family did not share the table during lunch with the person that worked at our house?” She blurted out, visibly annoyed by my question, “Because that is the way it is, I do not know, stop asking me that!” I was disappointed to say the least, but I also understood that questioning the status quo made people feel uncomfortable. Or was it guilt? My family was practically reproducing a tradition that didn’t make sense to me anymore. Or perhaps, I thought, my mother did not know how to explain it.

As I engaged in these conversations and the unfolding stories that people shared with me, I soon stumbled upon an issue I had not considered exploring yet: sexual harassment and rape as part of the labor relationship. Without exception, my relatives and friends identified the *patrón* or the male employer, or any other male family members as the harassers. It dawned on me: sexual harassment or rape of women domestic workers is an open secret in Mexican society.

In my own experience, women household workers develop a close relationship with the housewife and sometimes with the children, but limit their interactions with the *señor de la casa*, literally, the master of the household — the husband. If the interaction is limited, what situations make women vulnerable to be exposed to sexual harassment? How does it take place? But then I thought, what about women who work for single men

or young men attending college? I found this particularly interesting. If this indeed happens, how do women who are household workers manage to protect themselves? I also discovered that while people talked about sexual harassment and rape within the working relationship, some placed complete responsibility on the perpetrator while others hinted that engaging in flirting or a sexual exchange might be consensual.

To my surprise, as I conducted my initial research I learned that out of all the literature regarding sexual harassment in Mexico, none focused on sexual harassment or rape within the occupation of domestic service. Similarly, empirical research exploring the lives of women who are employed in paid household work barely mentioned it. Consequently, I seriously thought about exploring this topic and started looking for avenues through which I could establish personal communication with household workers that would be willing to talk to me. It was about time for me to listen to the “other side of the story.”

I decided to conduct research in the city of Monterrey, the capital city of the Northeastern state of Nuevo León and the third largest metropolitan, urban area in the country. I chose this area to decentralize the usual research locations found in the literature (Mexico City or other Southern states). Additionally, this region receives migrants from rural areas within the state and from different states in the nation. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), Nuevo León occupies the 3rd place in terms of the number of migrant domestic workers; Baja California and Quintana Roo occupy the 1st and 2nd place respectively (INEGI, 2006). As a researcher, I felt safe and comfortable about doing my fieldwork in Monterrey because

I was born and raised there; I know the culture well, and I also know my way around the city. However, I was discouraged from my emerging study multiple times by people who told me that I would have a hard time recruiting participants, which later proved to be right.

During the Winter break of 2009 I tried, unsuccessfully, to contact household workers through advertisements in the local newspaper in Monterrey. Although some women called, they backed out and did not show up for the interview. As I continued exploring possibilities to recruit informants, I finally found the support that I needed through Viccali, A.C., a non-governmental organization where I offered my work as a volunteer years earlier. At Viccali I was able to recruit participants and conduct interviews at their premises. I had lots of questions I wanted to explore, but given that this topic had not been explored yet, I decided to start with basic research questions: (1) Are women domestic workers vulnerable to sexual harassment? Why? and, (2) What are the social and cultural factors responsible for such vulnerabilities?

I will now briefly summarize the structure of my research. This master's thesis offers (1) a collection of life histories and, (2) a feminist informed analysis of their experiences and views of sexual harassment. As the interviewing process developed, and although I had an interview protocol with me to guide me in the process, I let the women incorporate what they thought was important. Most of them shared much more than just their work experiences and opinions about sexual harassment. Some of them, who are survivors of different forms of violence within their families of origin or marital relationships, trusted me enough to open up their hearts and share their stories, pain, and

path to recovery. Through their stories, I attempt to give voice to these household workers' life experiences, with their complexities and intricacies. In most cases, their work choices and experiences intersected with other aspects of their lives. They talked about their childhood, their families of origin, or their roles as mothers and wives. From these interviews, I felt as if that they wanted to make sure that I did not perceive them solely as household workers. In providing a rich and in depth life history for each participant, I also attempt to keep away from stripping them of their complex experiences of humanity, which is usually what happens to them within their working relationship. The title of this master's thesis – “Ni domésticas ni putas” - reflects the way my informants felt about the cultural conception of the household worker and the sexual objectification they are exposed to. With very few exceptions, my informants refused to identify as a “doméstica.” One of them actually said, “It sounds as if we are going to be domesticated by our employers, which is not the case. We are not animals.” As a way to honor this heartfelt sentiment, although I may use words and concepts that derive from “domestic work,” I do not use the word “doméstica” per se to refer to my informants in this thesis.

The analysis that follows explores four major themes that emerged from each of the interviews and through which I attempt to answer my research questions. Each theme explores a different aspect of household work or the working relationship that might facilitate or explain sexual harassment. The theme, “Entre Mujeres: Cautionary Tales” explores the type of information women share in order to protect themselves from sexual harassment and other forms of abuse. In “Por necesidad: I did it Out of Necessity” I look

into the social and economic restraints that working class women face as they are pushed into domestic work. As working class women with few economic opportunities, domestic workers, at best, end up tolerating what may appear to be less serious or dangerous forms of harassment, and at worst, these women are forced or coerced into having sex with their employers. The third theme, “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero: Race and Class Relations in Paid Household Work,” examines the ways in which employers mark these women’s bodies as rapeable. Some of the practices in domestic service that place the worker in a position of gender subordination emphasize their otherness also in terms of class and race. Finally, “Sexual Harassment: A Woman’s Problem,” explores the phenomenon of victim blaming that makes women accountable for men’s disrespect.

Next, I will address: (1) the methodology for my study, (2) my ethnographic journey (3) a description of the research site, and (4) a review of the literature.

METHODS

I chose a qualitative methodology approach with the purpose of allowing my research to capture an in-depth understanding of women domestic worker’s experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment. In this research study, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews with women who had at least 5 years of working experience as household workers. They were between the ages of 27 and 50 when I interviewed them. Data collection took place in Monterrey, Nuevo León, during the summer of 2010. On average, interviews were 3 hours long. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and tape-recorded; I conducted these interviews at a private space at Viccali. Participants

received \$200 pesos (approximately \$20 US dollars) gift cards redeemable at a popular local supermarket, as a means of compensation. The Institutional Review Board at UT Austin approved my study on December 7, 2009.

The recruitment of participants as well as the interviewing process took place at Viccali, A.C. (Vida con Calidad, A.C.), a Non Governmental Organization located in a working class neighborhood in the municipality of San Pedro Garza García. The organization provides free services for women survivors of domestic violence such as legal counseling, individual and group therapy, and handcrafting workshops, among others. Starting in 1996, Viccali has been working in detecting and preventing domestic and sexual violence in the community. They started offering counseling and legal services for battered women, as well as year-round workshops for children that aim at promoting a culture of peace. Throughout the years, as the community's needs have changed, Viccali has expanded their services and locations. At the present time, Viccali continues to work within working class communities and public schools in order to address gender violence, teen pregnancy, and school dropout among other issues and concerns.

The women heard about my research project and were invited to participate through Viccali's psychologists. This strategy was recommended to me by the organization's staff in order to respect the confidentiality of the women attending either individual or group therapy. Other participants were recruited using the snowball method. Women interested in participating requested a personal meeting with me to learn more about the research project and schedule their interviews.

Although I used an interview protocol to guide the conversations I also allowed participants to incorporate any information they found relevant. This strategy permitted the emergence of data and theory from a collaborative effort between researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). After each interview I listened to the audios in order to assess my performance as interviewer and detect any ideas I might have overlooked. Through this exercise I was able to improve my interview guide and follow up on issues that participants thought were important. During the interviewing process I also took field notes and documented the setting, meaningful anecdotes and participants' language use (Charmaz, 2006).

In order to guarantee confidentiality none of my participants was required to sign a written consent. Before each interview, the participant gave me her verbal consent. I also use pseudonyms in this thesis in order to protect my informant's identities. I wanted to make sure that my participants felt comfortable and at ease in order for them to talk openly about their experiences and perceptions of such a sensitive topic. When informants opened up to me about their own personal experiences of sexual harassment or sexual violence I explored the topic at their own pace and to the extent that they felt comfortable. Viccali provided the ideal setting for me and I was prepared to refer a potential informant to a psychotherapist at the agency if needed.

While I transcribed the interviews I identified the most common themes that came up in each woman's account, which enabled me to prepare individual life histories. The stories are divided in two sections. The first part of the life histories focus on the women's work experiences. I mainly elaborated the circumstances that led them to

become household workers and the relationships they developed with the families they served. The second part of the stories deals with the women's opinions and perceptions about sexual harassment in the workplace and elsewhere. From this storytelling exercise I develop a feminist informed analysis in which I attempt to explain the social and cultural forces that make women household workers vulnerable to sexual harassment.

REFLEXIVITY: FROM STUDYING SEXUAL HARASSMENT TO SURVIVING THE WAR ON DRUGS

Assessing my own positionality and personal history was crucial, as well as the impact this social positioning could potentially have on the data collection and analysis processes (Carrington, 2008). On the one hand, being a Spanish native speaker, born and raised in Monterrey granted me an insider perspective as a researcher. First, I have generous familiarity with Mexican culture and society. And second, I was born into an upper-class family that hired domestic workers and nannies while I was growing up. This fact places me in a hierarchical relationship as an insider who is privileged because of class and power: I have always been the daughter of the employer. On the other hand, I am an outsider because I have never worked as a domestic worker. In the midst of these dynamics, and as a result of my personal upbringing and academic training, I have been able to develop a critical understanding of the cultural and social practices that shape the "employer – domestic worker" relationship. In this sense, I was keenly attentive to and respectful of the racial, class, cultural, and educational differences that existed between my participants and me (see Carrington 2008).

My ethnographic experience became an excruciating journey because of Hurricane Alex; the kidnapping and apparent death of a recent boyfriend of 7 years; the unprecedented wave of drug cartel related violence in the city; and my relocation to a different region in the country, away from the city for safety reasons.

On the 30th of June of 2010 when I was almost done with the interviewing process, Monterrey started to experience the first effects of the hurricane. It rained non-stop for three days. Government officials said that hurricane 'Alex' was three or four times worse in terms of rainfall and damages than the 'Gilberto' that hit Monterrey in 1988. The metropolitan area of Monterrey and other surrounding areas collapsed, Monterrey and its urban area were left in ruins. The Santa Catarina River, which goes through the city and usually looks dry, roared as it flooded main highways and roads. Streets turned into rivers carrying rocks and dirt and cars were washed away. Several bridges and main highways collapsed or literally disappeared. In the meantime the city was paralyzed; other rural areas were left isolated. Most people struggled with electricity and water shortages as well as damages in their houses. Thousands lost their homes and all of their belongings. Overall, the image of the city was hard to process.

Given the magnitude of the situation I decided to temporarily suspend those interviews that I had already scheduled. Viccali closed for a day or two but I was able to stay in touch with my informants via telephone and see how they were doing. After a couple of days when it had stopped raining and it was relatively safe to drive to Viccali I went back to help assess the needs of the community. People were in shock and desperate for water and food. Mobs of angry and desperate people even assaulted mobile water

tank's drivers. Although government institutions and other civil society organizations had started collecting aid, it was insufficient and it was beginning to slowly reach under privileged communities.

About a month after the hurricane when I was getting ready to resume the interviews I got a phone call from a friend telling me that my boyfriend, had been *levantado*. The literal translation to English is 'picked up' or 'carried off.' This term started to circulate in public opinion to describe a practice, apparently exclusive of drug cartels, in which they abduct people either for the purpose of getting information out of them or for extortion. In the past, kidnappings in Monterrey were very rare. That summer newspapers reported about numerous cases of more levantones, supposedly as a side effect of military presence in Monterrey as well as violent fights between rival drug cartels.

My boyfriend was driving with one of his friends, when they were confronted by a group of armed men with AK-47s in the Colonia Independencia. His friend, an industrial designer, was looking for a fiberglass workshop in the area and did not want to drive there alone. A modest, working class neighborhood that was relatively peaceful and safe between the mid and late 20th century became increasingly stigmatized and demonized and is now known for being dangerous, especially at night, but it is also an area of car repair and other type of workshops. The Basílica de Guadalupe is also located at the heart of the neighborhood and receives thousands of visitors on December 12, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe as well as other Catholic holidays. There, on the streets of

the Colonia Independencia, my boyfriend's friend was shot to death and my boyfriend was kidnapped. To this day, we have not received any news about my boyfriend.

I can still remember the moment when I got the news. My hands trembled as I held my cellphone and thought to myself this could not be happening. The worse I could have imagined was that my boyfriend had been in a car accident or something similar. I had read and heard before about levantones on the news while I was still in Austin. Public opinion made it seem like people were taken away because they were somehow involved with the drug trade. I now believe that is what the government wants citizens to think. Although the number of people killed unfortunately grows each day and these figures are not precise, national and international news reports estimate that more than 50,000 people have been killed in Mexico as the result of the so called "war against drugs" launched in 2006 by the President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa. When he talks about the victims of drug related violence in the country he justifies his national security strategy and excuses the numerous deaths as "collateral damage."

As I deciphered ways to cope with my own grief and fear, my fieldwork was put on hold. I was in shock and I could not think about anything else — I was on survival mode. I spent most of my time at my boyfriend's parents' house to keep them company and make phone calls. Through one of his friends we were able to get an appointment to talk to Nuevo León's Attorney General at the time, Alejandro Garza y Garza. My boyfriend's case was first handled with suspicion. The Attorney General thought it was of vital importance to ask whether my boyfriend or his friend used drugs or were looking to buy at the time they were attacked. Aside from feeling desperate and out of his mind to

find his son, my boyfriend's father was outraged by such questions. In the following months, federal and local police as well as military personnel broke into several *casas de seguridad*, or safe houses, where criminals were holding people they had kidnapped in captivity. Newspapers praised the work of the military, and government officials bragged about their ability to address and confront drug cartels. Although the authorities claimed they were investigating our case, we received little information and no results. They concluded that members of a drug cartel in the area probably misidentified my boyfriend and his friend for someone else from a rival group.

Most cases of levantones and kidnappings in Monterrey are not reported. Many choose to keep quiet mainly because people are scared of retaliation or fear stigmatization. In our case, after people heard about my boyfriend's friend's death they also found out about my boyfriend. I heard that people who did not know them well were going around questioning whether or not they were involved with a drug cartel. We did however receive numerous phone calls and visits of people that meant well. A lot of people shared their own, as well as other people's experiences, dealing with similar cases. That was how we found out about the numerous cases that went unreported and what the newspapers apparently did not want to not talk about. We learned that a lot of people were being kidnapped and kept in security houses. Sometimes they crowded as many as 40 people in the same room. Friends and family members told us that we needed to be patient. At times people were set free after a couple of days, others after weeks or months. We even learned about cases in which people were set free without paying

ransom money. Sometimes their captors would set them free and drop them by a local mall or deserted highway for them to find their way home.

As time went by it got harder to keep calm. However, we barely cried because we kept telling one another that there was still nothing to cry about. My boyfriend's father had begun to look for him at the morgue of the *Hospital Universitario* but he found nothing.¹ I barely mourned his friend's death because I was busy being strong and struggling to be resilient alongside my boyfriend's family. I noticed myself and the others forgetting what day of the week it was. Waiting made us lose track of time. When the sun went down and it got dark outside we were literally left in the dark in more than one way. Not even a movie could pull my mind away from constantly thinking about my boyfriend or whom else we could call for help. About three months after he was taken away, a person who had been kidnapped and was lucky enough to escape contacted my boyfriend's family. He had learned about his tragic fate through an acquaintance and confirmed to us that he had seen my boyfriend being held captive at the place he had escaped.

We kept our faith, but from reading the newspapers, it was also inevitable to imagine the worst. Our fear for him, our loved ones, and ourselves took hold of us. On a daily basis people were being kidnapped or shot to death on the streets, sometimes in broad daylight. There were constant reports about bodies being found on highways or in

¹ The Hospital Universitario – University Hospital - is a teaching hospital and one of the most important public hospitals in Monterrey linked to the State's public University. It mainly serves middle and working class populations who have access to public health insurance or cannot afford to pay for healthcare elsewhere. Unfortunately, it has a bad reputation due to poor medical service.

clandestine graves — *las narcofosas*. Vehicle thefts were also on the rise. People I knew had were leaving the country. Others, who were less lucky and could not afford to leave, moved to other states or stayed in Monterrey and lived in fear.

For months we kept waiting to hear from my boyfriend, hoping that someone would call and demand money in exchange for his liberty but that phone call did not arrive. Ever since he was taken away on the 27th of July of 2010, his mother, a devoted Catholic, has not stopped praying. After exhausting all our options through the Justice system in Nuevo León, one of his sisters filed a formal report with the *Subprocuraduría Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada* (SIEDO)—Mexico’s federal intelligence agency specialized in organized crime. She fought for and demanded a thorough investigation even though government officials hinted she should give up after so much time of his absence. To this day my boyfriend’s parents keep a packed suitcase with his things in case he is found and they need to leave the country.

I was supposed to go back to Austin to finish my thesis on the Fall 2010 but I could not leave Mexico without first hearing any news about my boyfriend. Thus, I stayed in Monterrey and towards the end of October 2010, I moved to Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo. The situation in Monterrey had become unbearable as I was constantly in a state of fear. In Playa del Carmen I was not exposed to the kind of risks that one faces in Monterrey. Being close to the ocean was a good change for me and I could still jump on a plane if my boyfriend’s family received any news. However, Playa del Carmen faces other social problems different to those that affect Monterrey. Robberies are very common; in fact people jokingly call the town *Playa del Crimen* — Beach of Crime.

After a couple of months of living in Playa, as many people call it, my laptop was stolen. I lost all the original audios and transcripts I had worked so hard on. The valuable bibliographies, in full text, that I was able to retrieve during a trip to Mexico City in the summer of 2009 were also lost.

Because of these extenuating circumstances I continued to modify my research project in order to adapt it to my situation. I had originally planned on writing an ambitious thesis following a grounded theory methodology based on a total of 15 interviews. Because I was struggling emotionally, I was advised by my mentor to suspend the interviews and was left with only 11 of them. Although it was not an easy decision, I finally decided to write a master's thesis that was not as ambitious as I originally intended. Drawing from the 5 life stories I was able to retrieve from my email, I decided to present a project that incorporates storytelling with a critical feminist informed analysis of each story. All of the names I use in this MA thesis are fictitious.

Working through this project has been painful and a healing process at the same time. In particular, working on the transcriptions and writing up the individual life histories gave me the strength to keep on going. The stories my informants shared about their daily hardships and the ways in which they found courage to keep on going taught me many lessons and brought warmth to my heart — my heart was deeply touched by their stories.

In spite of everything that happened, I did not lose interest in my project. While the federal government is investing millions to militarize cities across the country in order to fight drug cartels, they ignore other structural social problems that need urgent

attention like access to education, better working conditions, and improving standards of living. In this sense, the experiences of the women that I interviewed and what I learned while I worked on my fieldwork are of vital importance. With no doubt, the unprecedented violence that Mexico is experiencing is in part rooted in what I discovered in the lives of the women, mainly disturbing economic disparity rooted in classism, racism and other complex forms of oppression that can no longer remain uncovered.

THE RESEARCH SITE: VICCALI, A.C.

My first attempts of participant recruitment took place during the Winter break of 2009 in Monterrey, Nuevo León. Given that women domestic workers are usually isolated in the workplace, I first tried to make contact through newspaper ads and at the *Alameda*. The Alameda is a public park located in downtown Monterrey where both men and women domestic workers get together on their days off, usually Saturdays and Sundays. I had read and heard about researchers approaching this population at the Alameda. In fact, this public space often serves as a meeting place for domestic workers and potential employers. The newspapers ads were published during three weeks in the classified advertising section for household workers of El Norte, Monterrey's main daily newspaper. However, both of these strategies failed.

At the Alameda, the women seemed unwilling to speak with me. When I approached them they mostly nodded or giggled. Although I was born and raised in Monterrey and I spoke the language, in their eyes I was still an outsider in terms of race and class. In retrospect, I think this recruitment strategy could have eventually worked if I

had spent a couple of months at this research site. The newspaper ads worked in part. Some of the women who called asked if I was hiring; one of them actually thought that I wanted to hire a woman to find out if my husband would cheat on me. Nonetheless, I did get several phone calls of women that disclosed their experiences of sexual harassment and were interested in participating. Sadly, I was not able to get any interview out of this recruitment plan. After the initial phone calls and although I did schedule several appointments they either backed out, did not show up, or I was unable to contact them because they had given me false telephone numbers. Despite the shortcomings, the strategy served as a means of confirming what I suspected: that women who work in domestic service are in fact exposed to sexual violence and that some would be willing to talk about it if the conditions were right. Lastly, I also learned an important lesson: Women who are vulnerable in more than one way were right to distrust someone they did not know, especially if they are poor, migrant women relocating from rural areas who may have histories of abuse by strangers. They might have also felt vulnerable in an increasingly violent city.

Before traveling to Monterrey in the Summer of 2010 I decided that working through a community-based organization was a better option. Through an NGO I could have easier access to potential participants and other resources. In addition, because of a professional affiliation with the organization, potential participants would perceive me as someone who is safe and trustworthy. Besides, I had started to hear that the so-called war against drugs sponsored by the Federal Government had intensified in Monterrey and the city had become unsafe. Although I was scared, I drove by myself all the way from

Austin to Monterrey in May 2010. Newspaper articles had begun to report shootings at the border and on highways connecting Monterrey to the border area. As soon as I crossed the border into Mexico I drove directly, without stops, to the place I would be staying. It was only until I arrived in Monterrey that I learned that the University of Texas at Austin had issued a traveling restriction to my hometown. I was surprised. I had moved to Austin two years before at a time when Monterrey and San Pedro Garza García could still be called one of the safest cities in Latin America.

Keeping in mind the safety issue and the recruitment difficulties that I had experienced before, I chose to work through Viccali. I was also familiar with their staff and the work they do. During my undergraduate studies, I taught children's workshops as part of the internship requirement to graduate. Throughout my fieldwork I spent a lot of time at the research site. I conducted interviews during the morning hours and volunteered as social service coordinator the rest of the day. In terms of safety I avoided driving around the city. Within the community people identified me as part of Viccali's staff and as a result I could move around the neighborhood feeling relatively safe.

Through informal conversations with Viccali's staff and the children that attended the workshops I got a better sense of what went on in the community. During the time I spent there, the staff was handling the cases of sexual assault and incest of two young girls. The situation of one of the girls who I will call Daniela, a 7-year old girl, caught my attention. She was attending Viccali's workshops for children and she somewhat illustrated what I would later hear about some of my informants' childhood experiences. Each morning Daniela would find the outfit for the day that her mother had chosen for

her. She dressed and walked herself to school. Daniela's mother worked in domestic service and most of the time she was not around. Daniela attended school on and off; sometimes she missed classes because her mother needed a couple of extra hands at her job. After a while, we noticed that she was being abused; her back was bruised and she had several scars. Sometimes she arrived at the workshops wearing the same clothes as the day before. The psychologist who was working with her in individual therapy suspected sexual abuse. Through some of the other girls, we heard that Daniela's mother was expecting a baby boy, and she was planning on pulling Daniela out of school to care for her little brother. Before I left, Viccali was still working on her case. Boys, on the other hand, sometimes around the age of 8 and 10 years old were starting to get involved in *pandillas* or street gangs. An increasingly serious problem in the country, drug addictions among adolescents in the area were also common.

Viccali's workshops for children were designed, in part, to prevent boys and girls from roaming around the streets unattended while their parents are out working. In fact most of the children's mothers worked as household workers. Workshops served as an additional community support network for families in the hopes of improving the quality of life and preventing violence in the neighborhood. Despite Viccali's efforts, children and young adolescents, mainly boys, were being lured into participating in *pandillas* and drug cartels. When I first volunteered for Viccali in 2005 I drove a convertible Volkswagen a couple of years old. I still vividly remember when a young boy that attended the workshops came up to me and asked, pointing to my car, if my dad worked in the drug trade. During this time, an 8-year old boy startled me as I started to get out of

my car. He opened my car door and pretended to hold and point a gun at me as he shouted “*Zetas!* Hands up where I can see them!” The Zetas is one of the most powerful drug cartels in Mexico.

In fact, drug cartels hire members of street gangs as drug distributors and *halcones*, literally “hawks,” meaning “their informants.” Viccali’s staff was also aware that adolescents that lived in the area participated in *narcobloqueos*, sometimes in exchange of school supplies or the promise of a free *carne asada* (barbeque) and beers for their families. Narcobloqueos are strategic blockades set in place when an important drug lord is under attack or captured. They are designed to literally block the way and avoid for backup police and military personnel to reach the area of the attack or shooting that is taking place. During that summer a drug cartel coordinated the biggest narcobloqueo that Monterrey had seen so far; it was my first encounter with this procedure. Main city roads in almost all of Monterrey’s municipalities were blocked and police forces did not intervene; they argued that they did not act against the blockage as a means to avoid a generalized shooting. The public was outraged. The scene was scary: ordinary citizens were pushed out of their vehicles or forced, sometimes at shotgun, to block the streets with their cars. In the meantime, the city was paralyzed.

Neighbors and some of the women that attended Viccali talked about street gang violence and occasional shootings in the surrounding areas, especially at night. The local police authorities have become increasingly incompetent and disempowered, so the police do not respond to neighbors’ reports of violence, and if police are around acts of violence, they choose not to intervene. The women at Viccali have also shared that the

police force could not be trusted anymore because members of the Zeta Cartel, one of the most violent organizations in México, had infiltrated the police force.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In patriarchal Mexico, women frequently perform household duties and provide service to their families and their male kin; work that is devalued. Moreover, women who are paid to do household work are further devalued socially and morally. The different forms of devaluation represent the interests and maintenance of the status quo. Consistent with what I learned from my family and friends, the social devaluation of these women remains unchallenged. Instead, it is taken for granted as the norm. Research on the lives of these women, however, has gradually examined different aspects of their life experiences. Studies about women domestic workers in Mexican society have focused mainly on the working conditions and legal issues and concerns affecting their lives as workers. These research projects have exposed the precarious working conditions that women in these occupations have historically endured, including but not limited to discrimination, emotional and physical abuse, exploitation, and lack of legal protection (Garduño Andrade, 1986; Gutiérrez Leyva, 2001; Reyes Álvarez, 1999). As a form of informal labor, the majority of the women going into domestic work are unprotected by the law, thus making them vulnerable to the offer and demand law. For instance, women in these occupations and their employers usually negotiate the pay, working hours, and duties, but only informally and as part of a personal arrangement without legal protection for these women (Leff Zimmerman, 1974). A household worker's responsibilities may

traditionally include: cleaning, care work for the elderly and pets, doing laundry, ironing, and cooking among other responsibilities (Leff Zimmerman, 1974; Mancilla Casalez, 1998). Women engage in these activities within work schedules that may exceed the legal standards established for other occupations. This pattern creates conditions of abuse and exploitation especially for live-in domestics who in extreme cases are expected to be available for servitude any time of the day or night. Moreover, cultural and social differences between the employer (i.e., white/blanqui-mestiza, middle or upper class housewife) and the employee (i.e., Indigenous) have also been pointed out as a source of mistreatment, dependency, and subordination within the working relationship (Robles Romero, 1992).

More recently, researchers' attention has shifted towards the issue of workers' rights and thus have explored the problem of women domestic workers' lack of legal protection (García García, 2009). Research has shown that some of these women (especially indigenous and under aged girls) have, (1) salaries below the minimum wage, and (2) lack important legal benefits including but not limited to health insurance, Christmas bonus (*aguinaldo*), and overtime pay (Martínez Hernández, 1998). These studies have called for the urgent need of public policy, legal reform, and governmental intervention in order to protect the rights of women domestic workers (Archunda Martínez, 2008; Mendoza Melendez, 2006). Non-Governmental organizations like Atabal have also emphasized the need of recognizing and respecting the value of domestic workers' labor and their legal rights as workers (Joffre Lazarini, 1994; Ortiz Pérez, 2002; Rodríguez Varela).

Historically, the vulnerability of women domestic workers has been explained through the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, age, and citizenship. Women's vulnerability might also depend on whether they work as live-in or live-out domestics. Since the Spanish Conquest (1519-1521) and Colonization (1521-1810), people of Indigenous and African descent have been performing domestic work in Mexico. A small population of African slaves arrived with the Spaniards but as the indigenous population decreased due to forced work and disease, the African slave trade was extended to Mexican territory (Mondragón Barrios, 1999). Scholarship has continued to show that women that go into domestic work are born in poor rural or urban working class families; these young women are forced to go into domestic work as a result of few working opportunities and economic hardship (Grau M., 1980). The phenomenon of migration of women from rural (i.e., poverty stricken states with large indigenous populations) to urban areas throughout Mexico and their incorporation into paid domestic work has been documented (Vázquez Flores & Hernández Casillas, 2004). Although men are still employed in paid domestic work, the most recent trend has been towards the feminization of domestic service (Goldsmith Connelly, 1998). According to the INEGI, women represent 91% out of the 1.8 million people employed in domestic service (INEGI, 2006).

Until recently, research has begun to emphasize the dangers that domestic work represents for girls and young adolescent women. Research has shown that in some cases women domestic workers begin to work from an early age, some as young as 10 years old (OIT, 2002). Migrant children who are employed as live-in domestics are isolated in the workplace and lack a support system or family members watching out for them

(Arenal, Ramos, & Maldonado, 1997). Research conducted by Thais (a Mexican non-governmental organization), has also pointed out that girls who work as live-in domestics are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, prostitution, and sexual trafficking or white slave trade (Thais, 2005). Moreover, recent qualitative research conducted in Peru with women domestic workers found severe human rights violations in the workplace including sexual violence (Ojeda Parra, 2005).

From a contrasting perspective, Mary Goldsmith (1998) has argued that the popular held idea that “domestic workers are raped by their bosses or by their bosses’ sons” (93) is a myth. Goldsmith argues that a study conducted by CONLACTRAHO (Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar)² found that a *minority* of the women domestic workers who were surveyed stated that they had experienced sexual harassment or rape, and that very few mentioned their boss or their boss’ son as the perpetrator (Goldsmith Connelly, 1998). Two concerns come to mind. First, Goldsmith’s position is thought provoking especially if analyzed in the light of the research mentioned above. And second, Goldsmith does not provide further information about the methodology used for the cited study, which deserves special attention and clarification. What we do know is that in cases of sexual violence, quantitative methods (like the survey used by CONLACTRAHO) may represent a serious methodological concern if they are not carefully designed. For instance, research has found that labeling sexual harassment has the potential to be psychologically difficult for a woman whose body is very likely to be expropriated by her family and men while being raised in a

² My English translation: Latin-American and Caribbean Confederation of Female Household Workers

patriarchal culture (Gavey, 2005; Giuffre & Williams, 1994). As a consequence, some methodologies may not facilitate rapport between researcher and an informant and thus making it difficult to yield accurate results. Thus, although we cannot generalize and assume all household workers are sexually harassed, as we continue examining these issues in future research on sexual harassment and women employed in paid household work, we need to be intellectually curious and sensitive to these and other methodologically related issues and concerns.

Although the research conducted to this day represents an important contribution to the understanding, conceptualization, and theorizing of women who engage in paid domestic work, there are important limitations. First, qualitative research about this topic has been conducted either in Mexico City or in other central or southern Mexican states (Goldsmith Connelly, 1990; Grau M., 1980; Leff Zimmerman, 1974; Phillips, 2006; Robles Romero, 1992; Sillas Ramírez, 2004). To date, there is only one known investigation about women domestic workers conducted in the Northern state of Nuevo León which explores education and adolescent domestic workers (Arenal et al., 1997). Second, none of the studies cited above have examined issues of sexual harassment. Even though some of the research acknowledges some sexual abuse and sexual harassment cases – perpetrated both by acquaintances and employers, respectively – none of the investigations pursue further exploration on the issue (Arenal, et al., 1997; Grau M., 1980).

According to Patricia Espinosa Torres, director of the *Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres*, 50% of the women that participate in the formal economy (15 million) in

Mexico suffer some form of sexual harassment. This statistic might not be accurate, however, due to the lack of a *cultura de denuncia* among the citizenry – crimes go underreported due to corruption and impunity. At times women decide not to press charges out of shame or because they fear retaliation. In other instances, sexual harassment complaints might be discarded due to errors in the integration of files or other flaws of the Mexican justice system (CIMAC, 2006).

The Penal Code of the state of Nuevo León contemplates sexual harassment along with other sexual crimes such as *atentados al pudor* (sexual assault, also defined as “indecent assault”), *estupro* (rape of a minor), and *violación* (rape). According to the Penal Code of Nuevo León,

Original in Spanish:

*“Comete el delito de hostigamiento sexual quien asedie a otra persona solicitándole ejecutar cualquier acto de naturaleza sexual, valiéndose de su posición jerárquica o de poder, derivada de sus relaciones laborales, profesionales, religiosas, docentes, domésticas o de subordinación.”*³

My English Translation:

Legally speaking sexual harassment takes place when a person takes advantage of a hierarchical position of power by harassing and requesting any act of sexual nature. The harasser’s position of power might stem from any of the following

³ Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León (2005). Código Penal para el Estado de Nuevo León. Retrieved March 1, 2012, from www.nl.gob.mx/pics/pages/contraloria_leyes_estatales.../117.pdf

relationships: work, professional, religious, docent, domestic, or of subordination
(Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León, 2005)

Interestingly many of my informants labeled sexual harassment, experiences that legally speaking would fall under the category of sexual assault. In this respect, Giuffre & Williams (1994) cite Ellis, Barak, Pinto, Pryor, Reilly et al, and Schneider to offer a much more accurate definition that resonates with my participants' perceptions of sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment occurs when submission to or rejection of sexual advances is a term of employment, is used as a basis for making employment decisions, or if the advances create a hostile or offensive work environment Sexual harassment can cover a range of behaviors, from leering to rape (378, 1994).

Chapter 1: Life Stories

LUCÍA: “I DID IT OUT OF NECESSITY”

45 year-old Lucía, a married woman and mother of three children had not yet turned fifteen when she began to work *de planta*, a full time overnight job (and presumably permanent) as a household worker. Lucía and her 17-year-old sister at the time started to work together at a job that had been arranged by their mother. Lucía’s mom also worked for the same employer, however, she was hired *de entrada por salida* — a part time job as a household worker — and was not around to spend the night with her daughters at the employer’s home. During our conversation Lucía described the way in which her mother forced her and her sister to spend the night at the job. Pleading to her, Lucía would tell her mom, “*ama*, I do not want to stay! ‘No! You are going to stay!’ My mother would say. She forced us to stay.”

Although Lucía did not want to work *de planta*, working outside her home represented the perfect opportunity to escape domestic violence and her father’s alcoholism. She recalled, “I almost left... my family because of that, because my dad was really drunk when he hit me, he did not allow me to go out but [I could go out because] I had to work.” Lucía, however, did not see any economic gain; she had no control over her modest income since Lucía’s mother collected all of her daughters’ salaries.

At this first job arranged by her mother, the son of *la patrona*, her female employer, sexually harassed Lucía’s sister. Since her sister started working there before Lucía did, she does not know if this situation had been going on for a longer period of

time; she does not know how it started or evolved. Lucía knew that something was going on because her sister used to cry and tell her that she did not want to spend the night at the job. Lucía learned what was happening when one day, frightened and in shock, she saw the patrona's son come into the kitchen wearing nothing but briefs and tried to touch her sister. Lucía described the scene, "he kissed her and fondled her... and my sister could not do anything so I helped her to push him away. I hit him with the broom...I got really scared." Immediately after this event, Lucía and her sister stormed out of the employer's house and went back home.

Lucía advised her sister to come forward and tell their mom but her sister begged Lucía to be quiet. Lucía's mom found out through la patrona and as a result they all were fired from the job. Both the employer and Lucía's mom, held Lucía's sister responsible. They argued that she must have behaved like an "*ofrecida*" and "*vulgar*," meaning that she was a loose woman who seduced men sexually, a woman with no moral principles. Since Lucía witnessed what had happened, she defended her sister and repeatedly discredited the employer's version. As she recalls how everything happened, Lucía's voice is filled with anger and impotence: "My mom left her bleeding all over her face, with her eyes bruised, she beat her up with a belt that my mom had... one of those thick belts they used to have, [and she was] all wounded... my mother slapped me on the face... that I should not be saying [those things], and that las señoras should be respected and that one must behave according to what they say. So I thought it was supposed to be that way... I did not understand well."

Shortly after this unfortunate event and upon turning 15 years old, Lucía married and became a full-time housewife for a couple of years. After giving birth to her daughter, Lucía went back to work at a nearby *maquila*, an assembly plant, while her husband immigrated to the United States. Lucía's husband didn't want her to work, but she did it anyway. She explained, "he got angry at me, but I said... well, if you do not send me money, who is going to support me? My mother cannot do it, my father cannot do it... yes, we had many problems... but I did not tell him that I had male co-workers because [high pitch of voice] much less [it would be worse], he would not allow me to work!"

The new job was a challenge for Lucía; the maquila was hiring women for the first time and the manager had serious doubts that it was going to work out. At that time – around the 1980s – the maquila hired only one woman per shift, the rest of the staff were men. In order to get a job there, Lucía had to lie and say that she was a single mom because "back then, they did not hire married women." Finally with the help of a union representative, Lucía got the job. She worked at the maquila for over a year. Throughout all this time Lucía was constantly harassed and bullied by one of her supervisors and because Lucía would not accept his supervisor's sexual advances, he made Lucía's work more difficult. Lucía described how it was for her to work under these circumstances, "He would leave the equipment in bad shape so when I started my shift I would waste my time... that is why... he did not like me. He would say [to sexually harass me, using slang], 'You have to do it with me, otherwise, it will not work.'"

On several occasions Lucía tried to talk with the manager about what was going on, but her complaints were met by accusations and threats. He told Lucía, “You are *la chiflada*, the one who provokes him... so if there is a problem, you are out of here.” Since no one seemed to care, and the harassment continued, Lucía tried to intimidate her supervisor. Lucía told him, “Well, I am going to tell your wife [about all this] so you regret doing this, I am going to tell her that you are harassing me.” Lucía tolerated the harassment only because she really needed the job. This situation became worse when Lucía was working the night shift and her supervisor grabbed her from behind. Lucía immediately slapped him on the face. Sadly it was until this point that the manager decided to address the issue by calling a meeting. The supervisor was not fired immediately. To protect himself, the supervisor filed a report and accused Lucía of being asleep on the job. He said that when he approached to wake Lucía, she was startled and slapped him on the face.

Since no one believed Lucía, she requested the manager interview all other workers to find out if they had heard about or witnessed any type of harassment. Surprisingly, he talked with all the men but did not talk with the women. All the men favored her supervisor’s story, except one of Lucía’s co-workers who finally told the manager he had seen Lucía being harassed. As a result, Lucía was put under the supervision of another person, but the supervisor who harassed her was not fired. Eventually the supervisor that had been harassing Lucía was fired because the union continued to pressure the maquila. Not long after he was fired the manager gave him back his job. Lucía finally quit when the worker’s union went on strike.

After leaving the job at the maquila, Lucía worked for a short period of time at a sewing factory and in 1990 she reunited with her husband in the United States. Because Lucía was afraid of giving birth in the United States, she crossed the border a couple of times to give birth to her children in Mexican territory. Eight years later Lucía moved back to Mexico with her family but as soon as they arrived to Monterrey her husband developed a drinking problem and became physically abusive. Lucía said, “Before, I worked because he gave me little to no money, and sometimes he took money from me. They cut off the electricity, water, all the services . . . So, I went back to work. He would get drunk a lot. I started to work, and it was worse.” Lucía’s husband warned her that she could go back to work as long as she did not neglect her housework.

Since Lucía was not able to find an employer that would hire her the entire week, she worked *de entrada por salida* for several employers. In particular, Lucía built a strong bond with one of her *patronas* with whom she worked for a 7 year-period. Lucía described the conversation they had the day the *patrona* found out that she was being abused by her husband: “I never told la señora... when one day I arrived all beaten up. ‘What’s wrong Lucía?’ I told her, no, I fell, I fell or something. ‘No Lucía, that’s not right, you are lying.’” Lucía’s employer offered advice and a room in her house where Lucía could come to stay with her three children, but Lucía decided to stay with her husband. She worried about being away from her parents, one of whom suffered from diabetes, moving her children away from home, and the 2-hour bus ride commuting to school. Lucía also knew that her mother would not approve because one day she asked

her, “*ama*, if one day I leave Pedro what would you do? —‘You are crazy, you married to be with him, whatever he does to you, you have to stay with him’ [mother said].”

Around this time Lucía started to attend a Christian Church along with her husband. This newfound religion gave her the much-needed inner peace that she was looking for all these years. She believes that this is also the reason why her husband changed. Lucía said, “My husband changed a lot, with me. He definitely changed, he was another person, someone else, another man. A good man.” Two years ago Lucía decided to quit her jobs after her sister-in-law passed away and she was called to care for her children. Her long time employer advised Lucía to turn down the request, but she said, “I didn’t have that heart to see those kids... I took on the responsibility.” During this time Lucía has been selling tamales and empanadas that she prepares at home, an activity that she enjoys. Now that Lucía is done raising her sister-in-law’s children, she feels ready to go back to work.

At the time of our interview Lucía was attending Viccali’s support groups to recover from a depression. She giggled and said that she wants to contact a former employer and go back to work. Lucía hopes to help her son go back to college to earn a bachelor’s degree in Accounting.

I did it out of necessity

When I asked Lucía if she had heard the word sexual harassment she immediately told me about a friend and a neighbor that were harassed and became pregnant while working as household workers in Monterrey. Lucía lowered her voice as she recalled the

first time her friend said that el patrón, her male employer, was *grosero*, meaning that he was disrespectful and rude. Her friend's employer walked naked around the house and touched himself as he attempted to fondle her friend. Lucía was straightforward and said that her friend finally gave in: "She told me, she said 'I did it out of necessity'...but she became pregnant and he [the employer] wanted her to have an abortion but she refused...but I guess later on he looked for her...and he gave her [money], he repaired her house, it is very pretty." Her friend's daughter is now 13 years old and the patrón has continued to provide financial support to pay for the child's studies.

Lucía also knew about the case of a neighbor who was drugged unconscious and raped by the patrón while the female employer was out on vacation. Lucía explained, "She says that she started to feel very sleepy, very sleepy and then she does not remember anything. So then when she woke up she was on the bed, naked, and he was beside her." Visibly irritated, Lucía recalled that at the time her neighbor did not tell anyone. The patrón threatened to accuse Lucía's friend of stealing if she told anyone. Lucía's neighbor told her husband about the rape when he returned from the United States and discovered that she was pregnant. He has not been supportive; instead he has continued to bully his wife into thinking that she was responsible. He believes that his wife cheated on him, that it happened more than once, and that she enjoyed having sex with the patrón.

When riding the bus, Lucía has heard other household workers share their experiences of sexual harassment. One of the women said that her patrón requested her to wear revealing clothes while at the job but she replied, " I come here to work, I do not

come here to show off.” Another woman narrated that one time while she was cleaning the living room a young man – her patrón – played an X-rated movie and masturbated in front of her. Although she left the room and went into one of the bedrooms, the patrón followed her into the room, turned on the DVD and continued to masturbate while she cleaned. After episodes like these, household workers usually leave the job, sometimes without notifying their employers, but others might tolerate the circumstances and stay at the job. I asked Lucía how she would explain these employers’ behaviors and she said, “They are the ones that give orders and one has to obey, simply put, and if I am in need I’m going to tolerate it. I am going to tolerate while my husband finds a job, something, and then I will leave but I will endure the circumstances, if I do not have [money or a job] I have to put up with the situation.”

Lucía defined sexual harassment in terms of men’s actions and verbal expressions. In this case men might be disrespectful to women if they show them something (X rated movie or their own naked bodies) inappropriate, such as the cases of harassment that she described. Remarks about women’s bodies and a man’s glance can also be interpreted as sexual harassment. Lucía clarified that there is a very big difference between telling a woman that she’s pretty and telling her she has *buenas nalgas* — hot ass. Lucía would label the second statement as sexual harassment. She also believes that women have the ability to perceive when a particular remark or glance borderlines sexual harassment. It is something that the woman feels.

In order to avoid situations of sexual harassment or other types of abuse, Lucía has always relied on friends’ recommendations of potential employers. Nowadays

workers need to be more careful. Since the so-called War Against Drugs started to intensify in Monterrey and other surrounding areas, Lucía has witnessed military operations and has heard stories of police brutality against citizens. Police officers drive by her neighborhood but they do nothing about people who are selling drugs or getting high on the streets. Lucía believes that household workers who have experienced sexual harassment do not press charges because they are fearful, she explained, “[People] keep quiet because of fear. And now it is worse because of the City’s situation, because of fear.” If workers pressed charges, Lucía thinks that employers will be able to walk away without consequences because they are well connected in society. If she pressed charges she would not have the same advantage. Lucía argued, “Who am I?” meaning that she perceived herself powerless, nobody, socially speaking.

Lucía’s youngest daughter is 15 years old and she worries about her. Lucía does not want her daughter to follow her steps into paid household work; she explained, “I would not want my daughter going through what I have.... What my sister went through because my sister... I believe that she experienced awful things. I think she did because she started to work since she was very young... and she is still working in the United States.” Lucía clarified that being a household worker is not wrong, but she hopes that eventually her daughter will go on to earn a bachelor’s degree, work at a store or “at least” learn the skills to become a hairdresser.

When Lucía’s children were growing up she talked to them in order to protect them from sexual violence. She emphasized about being alert, even when they were around family (uncles, grandfathers, etc), and told them that she would be open to talk if

anything happened to them. As a child, Lucía’s uncle broke into her house and attempted to fondle her. She explained that the door to her house closed with a nail and her uncle was able to break in. While she struggled with him she screamed and told him to stop. Although Lucía’s father was drunk he managed to defend her, but she did not understand why no one talked to her about what had happened. Her father hugged her and asked, “He did not do anything to you, right? What did he do?” Lucía did not understand what her father was asking. She remembers her mom talking to her sister about what had happened but she was not allowed to hear or participate in the conversation. To this day Lucía does not understand why no one talked openly about what happened to her.

Lucía is 45 years old and was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León. She lived in the United States for 8 years. She is married and has three children. Her husband works as a construction worker and she has had access to “*el seguro*” through her husband – health insurance through the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (or IMSS), the state institution offering socialized medicine in the nation. Lucía has 8 siblings; three of them are currently living in the United States. She finished 1st year of *secundaria* (equivalent to 1st year of junior high) and identifies as Christian.

BELÉN: “IT MADE ME FEEL VERY BAD, I THINK THAT IS [SEXUAL HARASSMENT]”

Belén was born in Matehuala, a rural area in the state of San Luis Potosi. When she was two years old, Belén’s parents decided to relocate to Monterrey where she was

raised along with four other siblings. At the time of our interview Belén was mourning the death of her father who had passed away two weeks ago. While she sobbed Belén recalled that she never saw her parents fighting. Now, 39 years old, Belén is married and is raising three children. She has been married for the past 20 years and is currently trying to work things out with her husband. Years ago Belén's husband developed an alcohol abuse problem and she is not willing to tolerate it any longer. "A lot of things have happened...I have tolerated everything, I feel that I cannot do it anymore, it already reached its limit." The day before our interview Belén and her husband had a fight and in order to get Belén's attention he put his fist through a window and hurt himself. Belén sighed as she explained that since she got married she has been unhappy. Before marriage, Belén had a lot of fun during her teenage years. She laughed out loud and said that she had a lot of boyfriends and she liked to go out dancing.

Before getting married, Belén worked as a household worker. She started to work de planta along with a friend when she was 15 years old but they left the job after only three days. Initially the patrona had told them about their work responsibilities and salaries, but eventually the employer added chores that were not mentioned before. Besides making them work long hours, the patrona pretended to feed them spoiled food. Belén knew that the working conditions were not fair. She asserted, "I was young but I was very smart." Before Belén and her friend could leave the employer's home, the patrona emptied their purses and went through their things. The employer used a stick to avoid touching their belongings and wrongly accused Belén of stealing a soap bar.

Belén worked for other employers during short periods of time. Although she needed the money Belén did not stay long because she resented the working conditions and her employers' attitudes towards her. Belén recalled that her employers did not value her work and her salary was meager. One of the señoras argued that she could not pay her much more because she was young and hardly had any work experience. On another job, certain food and beverages were off limits for Belén. When she ate at her employer's home, the señora distributed the food among her family and reserved a small portion for Belén. After the family was done eating, Belén ate alone in the kitchen. Although she worked de planta and spent the night at the employer's home, the señora only offered Belén one meal per day. On one occasion, because she was very hungry, Belén had an extra portion of rice and took a coca-cola from the fridge. The patrona reprimanded her. At the end of the week when Belén was paid she realized her employer had deducted her salary. The señora argued that she was paying her enough considering that Belén slept and ate at her home.

When Belén was 16 years old she worked de entrada por salida for an old married couple. Her female employer was home most of the time and she constantly supervised Belén's work. However, when the señora was not around Belén's patrón, a man in his seventies constantly harassed her. Belén thinks the señora was aware of her husband's behavior because she did not allow her into the bedrooms. At times Belén's male employer caressed her hair and touched her hand whenever she handed him something. Belén explained, "He asked me to light his cigarettes because he wanted to grab my hands." Belén did as she was told but she found ways to distance herself from the señor.

In this case, Belén rested the cigarette on an ashtray and walked away as soon as she could.

Aside from the touching, Belén's patrón had other behaviors that made her feel uncomfortable and that she also identified as sexual harassment. She recalls that one time, while she was washing the dishes, her patrón stared at her body and tried to guess her jeans size. Immediately Belén made up an excuse and walked away. On another occasion while the patrón was in the shower he called out for Belén and asked her to bring a soap bar. Once again, Belén ignored her employer, pretending she had not heard.

Although Belén was afraid she asserted, "I tolerated [the situation] for a lot of time but [I did it] out of necessity. Like one says, I was nearly barefoot." She explained that money was so scarce that she did not have enough money to buy new sandals even though hers were falling apart. Eventually Belén told her parents about the harassment and after only three months she left the job. Belén's parents told her, "We have always told you, you do not have to tolerate [situations like these]. Here at least...we have beans and soup." Belén's older brother threatened to confront the patrón but the family stopped him in order to avoid any other problems. The issue was resolved when Belén left the job.

Belén finally got lucky when one of her friends recommended her for a job. At this job Belén worked Monday thru Friday, also de entrada por salida. She was in charge of cleaning the house and taking care of her employer's children. On several occasions Belén was invited by her patronas to go on vacations with them but she always turned down the invitations. Belén's friends advised her not to go. She explained, "Because like...my friends said, 'No Belén, maybe they are going to ask you to care for the

children.’ But the employers were telling me I did not have to do anything... ‘No, that is what they say but maybe when you get there they will tell you to look after the children.’ No, I am not going, I told the señora.”

Contrary to her past work experiences, at this job Belén was able to eat and drink whatever she wanted. She described her patrona as a kind and caring person. With a smile on her face, Belén recalled that her patrona made her own clothes on the sewing machine and the señora even sewed a couple of blouses for her. On Belén’s birthday the señora always had a present and a cake for her. On Mother’s Day, Belén’s mom also received a cake from the patrona. When Belén was expecting her first baby the señora let Belén have all of her children’s old clothes and newborn accessories.

However, when Belén found out she was pregnant, and consequently decided to get married, she left the job. Belén’s patrona did not want her to leave. The señora even tried to convince Belén’s family to let her stay at the job but Belén’s husband said, “No, she is not going to work [anymore].” According to Belén’s husband, women who work *se creen mucho*, meaning that they become arrogant and proud. Although Belén’s economic situation might not be the best, she believes it is more important to stay at home caring for her 8 year-old daughter who was diagnosed with leukemia. Despite her husband’s prohibition and her mothering responsibilities, Belén has found ways to provide for her family.

For over a year and without leaving her home Belén did production work for a friend who worked at a Mexican candy assembly plant. Although Belén did not get a full salary she received a payment according to the amount of product she assembled. Belén

recalled with joy that her children and other family members participated in this activity and it served as an excuse to play and interact. During the past eight years Belén has also volunteered in several governmental aid organizations that sell food to working class families at discounted prices. When she served as community organizer, Belén's family benefited from the organizations' help. However, once she got an insider's look of each organization Belén learned about cases of corruption. In most cases the head of the organization in question distributed the help at their discretion and increased the price of the food for their own economic gain. Although Belén and other neighbors filed a complaint nothing was done. Disappointed, Belén told one of the people in charge, "I told her, 'No, I have never liked to exploit people.' And I told her, 'No, I will not be coming back.'"

It made me feel very bad, I think that is [sexual harassment]

When I asked Belén how she defined sexual harassment she could barely find the words but she managed to describe the feeling. Belén was able to recognize that her employer was being inappropriate because she felt very uncomfortable. Although Belén started to work at a very young age she was able to look out for herself using her mother's advice. With her mother's recommendations, Belén gained her employers' trust and protected herself from sexual violence. Belén's mother told her that sometimes employers would leave money or jewelry where it could be easily spotted by her in order to test her honesty. Belén's mother also advised her daughter to scream or run away if she

found herself in a close encounter with rape. Sarcastically, Belén emphasized, “But surely they will give me the chance to run or scream.”

Belén has heard that women who occupy administrative positions, such as office assistants or secretaries, are common targets of sexual harassment. Outside of Belén’s own experience, she knows a friend that has been sexually harassed at several jobs. Years ago while her friend worked as a household worker for a married couple, the son of her patrones harassed her. The man in his early thirties attempted to hug and kiss her without her consent and constantly checked her cell phone. Her friend’s employers also pressured her to accept their sons’ displays of affection. Because the harassment did not stop Belén’s friend left the job after a few weeks. In her last job at a hamburger stand in 2008, the employer offered Belén’s friend \$1,000 pesos (approximately \$ 100 US dollars) in exchange for sex and rubbed his body against hers at every opportunity. She was very scared and finally quit the job. Moreover, Belén shared that her friend was recently fired from her last job, due to her pregnancy because her employers were afraid she could injure herself while doing household tasks.

Belén believes that sexual harassment is so widespread because women keep quiet about their experiences of sexual violence. She blames herself for how she handled her own experience. She explained, “Like me, I kept quiet and I never told the señora. I was afraid...if I tell the señora and she does not believe me or [says] that I was the one that provoked [her husband]... because there are people like that, they believe whatever they [men] say instead of what the woman is saying.” Belén recognized that the working relationship of household workers and their employers is characterized by social and

racial inequality that makes women workers vulnerable to sexual harassment. Like her friend's employer who attempted to exchange sex for money other employers might be taking advantage of women's economic necessity. Belén argued, "Because they have money...maybe because they are the patrones and they have money [they think] well we can buy [women]." Drawing from her own experience she believes that women cannot prevent men from being disrespectful. However, women can choose to distance themselves from situations of harassment; in Belén's case she decided to quit her job.

Times have certainly changed since Belén first started working. Monterrey has become a dangerous city and the *narcoviolencia*, drug war related violence, has taken hold of the city. Nowadays, being a household worker might represent a greater risk for women workers, especially because most of the times they work for people they know nothing about. Belén has a family member, a household worker, who recently quit her job when she learned that her employers were members of the organized crime. Belén's relative was receiving a very generous salary but when she actually saw that drugs were being distributed to other places from her employer's home she immediately left the job. In shock, Belén whispered that at least her family member is safe because she did not give her real home address to her former patrones.

Belén is 39 years old and was born in Matehuala, San Luis Potosi. She arrived to Monterrey when she was two years old and has been living there ever since. She is married and has three children; she had another child that died soon after she gave birth.

Belén has four siblings and identifies as Catholic. She finished *primaria*, the equivalent of elementary school and has had access to socialized medicine through her husband.

VALENTINA: THAT WAS NOT SEXUAL HARASSMENT, THAT WAS RAPE

Valentina, now 38 years old and mother of three, constantly tells her children about her experiences growing up, “I went out to the streets looking for a job and I was [high pitch of voice] young! Putting myself at risk for someone to grab me.” While Valentina’s mom stayed at home caring for three of her younger children, Valentina and two of her sisters worked as *de planta* household workers. Valentina sighed as she began to narrate why she started to work when she was 13 years old: “We had to go out [to work] because... [silence]... my dad was [low pitch of voice] very severe also. He worked but he never brought money... we looked at our younger brothers and...we did not want them to go through what we had lived, so *vamos!* let’s go find a job!” Valentina and one of her sisters both found their first jobs knocking house by house.

As Valentina remembered her first work experience as a household worker she said, “It was heavy [work], [high pitch of voice] *ay* sometimes I even cried!” At times, Valentina had to stay up late taking care of the *patrona*’s children until she got home, sometimes until 1 o 2 in the morning. In particular, she remembers the pain of doing the laundry and the constant supervision of her *patrona*’s mother, who also lived there. The *patrona*’s mother demanded Valentina use gloves and a plastic apron while she hand-washed the clothes. If Valentina forgot to use the gloves and plastic apron she had to do it all over again. She described the *patrona*’s mom as “very scrupulous.” Valentina

explained, “That was [the thing] that affected me the most. [She sighs] I thought to myself, *ay* why is she like that? Well, we do not have anything, we are poor but we do not have anything nor do we have anything on our hands, but the señora was like that.”

When Valentina ate at her employer’s home, her patrona’s mother assigned her a fork and a plate for her exclusive use. Although Valentina thought that was strange at the time, she giggled as she told me that habit has stayed with her until now. Valentina’s employer asked if her mother was bothering her but she was afraid of speaking up, she wanted to keep her job and was afraid that her patrona would get mad at her if she said anything. At this job Valentina had to use a uniform, a dress that went down to her knees, and which made her feel uncomfortable. She explained the reason of her discomfort, “[people] look at you [in a] weird [way]...there are people that stare and stare like that... right now you greeted me and there are people that do not even greet you.”

Although it was hard work Valentina was grateful with her patrona. At her parent’s place there were times when they would eat whatever they could find because there was not enough food for all the family; on the contrary, at this job Valentina knew she would have three daily meals. Whenever la señora disposed of, old clothes, furniture, or left over food, she gave it to Valentina to distribute among her family. On her day off, Valentina went home and handed over her salary to her mom. Valentina sighed as she recalled that at her first job de planta she had access to a lot of amenities that she did not have at home such as a room and bed of her own, a TV, and plenty of food. On the other hand, Valentina’s sister – who was also working de planta – spent the whole day without eating. Since Valentina worked a few houses away from her sister’s employer, she would

cross the street and bring her sister a taco or two. Valentina explained that some patronas are *fijadas* when it comes to food, that is, they do not allow workers to grab something to eat even though they spend the night at the job.

Although Valentina's sister would go on the entire day without eating and was harassed by the patrona's son (a young man who suffered from a mental disability), she waited until the end of the week to get paid. Valentina said in shock, "And [the patrona] did not pay her... she did not give her anything to eat in the entire day, [high pitch of voice] the whole day!" Valentina talked with her sister's patrona and demanded her sister be paid, but Valentina was threatened, "You can do whatever you want, I am going to say that you robbed me, that you did this, that you took this and lets see what you can do." Valentina reflected about the importance of her work as she tried to understand why some employers do not recognize it as such. After all, she said, without household workers, like herself, employers would not be able to go out to play domino or host gatherings in their homes.

During the 5 years that Valentina worked for her first patrona, every night someone knocked on her door but she never opened. She giggled as she narrated, "Since I had heard stories, I said no, I am not going to open, I had my door closed... [high pitch of voice] I never found out who knocked at my door, but no one called [my name], they just knocked and I thought, ay who can it be?!" Valentina knew that her patrona was not the one knocking on her door because when she needed her, the señora shouted and called her by her name. Fearful, Valentina would open the shower and let the water run – sometimes during the whole night – to cover up the noise of the knocking on her door.

She thought about opening the door but since her room was far away from the bedrooms she knew no one would hear if she cried out for help. Valentina suspected her patrona's father, who also lived there, and whom Valentina remembers as very *tremendo*, meaning he was disrespectful.

Whenever Valentina handed him something he caressed her hand or her face and said "you are very pretty *mija*, you look like Tatiana, [a Mexican actress and children's music singer]." He also offered to buy her things, anything she wanted, but Valentina ignored him. Valentina identified his touch as sexual harassment because it did not feel like a normal touch. She never told her patrona about the late night knocking on her door; she would have said something only if the situation had escalated. As she recalled her sister's first job experience, she repeated the employers' words, "Because it is your word against theirs and you are not going to be able [to do anything]." Valentina did tell her mother and expressed her concern, "Ay! I get very scared...and at night, *hijole*, geez! Sometimes I do not want the night to come." Valentina's mother told her that the wind was probably making that noise, she advised her to be alert, close her door, and if anything else happened she should talk to her employer. Valentina's mom feared that her daughters could be targets of sexual violence while working away from home, so she gave protective advice in addition to keeping track of their menstruation cycle.

Upon turning 18 years old Valentina got married and quit her job, but after a year she went back to work with a family member of her former employer. Now married, Valentina worked *de entrada por salida*, but after only 4 months on the job she was forced to quit because her husband became jealous. Although Valentina seemed to want to avoid

my question, she explained that ever since she got married she had to work because her husband did not appear to be able to find a job. About four years ago, her husband started to work and pay alimony as a result of Valentina reaching out to an organization for help.. Valentina sighed as she explained, “I decided that it was enough, that I was not going to give him any [money] because I could not [do it] any longer. It was then that the authority [ordered] that he had to work and he had to give me money.”

During the past two years Valentina has alternated between selling food and working for a señora. With a smile on her face she recalled that at this job she was able to bring her youngest daughter to work with her and when they ate, “[high pitch of voice] I sat with her!” Traditionally, in the working relationship it is very rare that the family invites the worker to sit at the same table with the whole family. Valentina explained that although at first she was embarrassed, her employer said, “We are the same, what difference does it make that I have a van and that you go on foot? No, no, no, *ándeale*, come on.” When Valentina told her mom – a former household worker – she could not believe it.

Two years ago Valentina fell into a depression and stopped attending her job without notifying her patrona. Valentina giggled as she said that sometimes she feels like going back to that job but she’s afraid of how her former patrona might react: “But then I think, what if she gets mad? She is going to say, well... you left and you did not come back.” Valentina still feels very grateful with her former patrona. Like Valentina’s first employer, the señora gave her used toys and clothes for her children to use. Valentina

reflected that she was hired without recommendations and she was given a key to let herself in, “And she [high pitch of voice] trusted me! Do you understand?” — she said.

Valentina is still attending Viccali where she has received therapy for her depression problem and is close to full recovery. There she has also learned about women’s rights. Although some people might not value her work and household workers are abused by their patrones, Valentina asserted that her work matters and should be valued.

That was not sexual harassment, that was rape

While Valentina worked as a household worker she was aware that she needed to be alert and protect herself against sexual violence. When she was around 14 years old, she heard of a friend – about the same age – who was raped by the son of the patrona, a young man in his twenties. Valentina asserted, “That was not sexual harassment, that was rape...and she could not do anything because the señora said that we could not do anything because we are nobodies.” Until this day Valentina feels a sense of responsibility for what happened to her friend because she recommended her for that job.

The morning after Valentina’s friend was raped she left the house of her employer and told Valentina what had happened. Although they feared the señora they both confronted her. The patrona blamed Valentina’s friend and defended her son, “That is not true, [what you are saying] is a lie, my son is not like that he has never done anything like that.” On the contrary, Valentina’s friend said that, “He had come into [her bedroom] through the window and that he grabbed her against her will and that she could not free

herself.” Out of fear, Valentina questioned her friend about the veracity of her story; she wanted to make sure that it was all true because, “The señora said that if it was a lie we would all go to jail.”

As a result of the rape, Valentina’s friend got pregnant and was beaten by her mother, “She wanted to get rid of [the child] with a beating.” Although Valentina and her friend’s mother tried to talk with the patrona she kept denying everything. The employer said, “Do whatever you want but we are not going to respond [accept their responsibility], we are just going to say that it is a lie, she did not work here and that is all.” Valentina recalled, although she does not know specifics, that her friend’s mother pressed charges but nothing was done. Valentina exhaled as she said that her friend suffered a lot. Her friend never married, she has two children and lives with her mother. She is currently working at a bar in downtown Monterrey.

When Valentina was growing up her mother talked to her about being vigilant to protect herself from sexual violence; Valentina has also talked to her children about the topic. She has three daughters, a 20 year old and two teenagers of 15 and 14 years old. Valentina has told them that, whether they are at school, at work or on the street, they should not allow people to fondle or to kiss them without their consent, even if it is a family member. Later she explained, “When they get older and if they allow it, then that is because they want it.” Just like her mother told Valentina she advises her daughters to get away and ask for help if someone is harassing them.

When Valentina was 12 years old a man harassed her while she rode the bus. At that moment, she recalled her mother’s advice and was able to do something about it. The

man sitting next to Valentina pretended to be asleep and tried to put his hands between her legs. Valentina labeled this event as sexual harassment, she pushed him away but since he kept bothering her she asked for help from another person sitting next to her. The man stopped and when the bus reached the next stop Valentina got off the bus.

In retrospect, Valentina reflected about her working experience and the fact that she started to work at a very young age, “*Ay*, sometimes I think *ay*, we were very young, [at least] we were not killed out there because mamá would not hear [about us] until Saturday, when we returned [home]. I tell you, *hijole*, geez!” Valentina is worried for several young women that live with a neighbor; they came to Monterrey from nearby rural areas and has heard them complain about long working hours and poorly paid jobs. They all work *de planta*, which Valentina believes makes them more vulnerable to sexual violence. She also thinks that women from rural areas are ill prepared and lack information in order to protect themselves from sexual violence.

Like many household workers Valentina has never had access to socialized medicine or other working benefits. On several occasions during our conversation Valentina emphasized that workers should be protected or have somewhere to go to for help. She has heard that Mauricio Fernández, the Mayor of San Pedro, is working towards bringing help to household workers. Valentina believes that employers harass household workers because their social status and class privilege allows them to, “I think that [they harass the workers] because they have money and [the authority] does not do anything to them, that is why they *hacen y deshacen* [do as they please].” Valentina

thinks that efforts to protect household workers and the recognition of their rights might help prevent sexual harassment.

Valentina is 38 years old. She was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, and raised in the Colonia Independencia. She is married and has three daughters. Valentina has 6 siblings and finished 6th of primaria, equivalent to 6th grade. She identifies as Catholic. She has never had access to el seguro.

ESPERANZA: “BUT THE YOUNG MAN SAYS THAT HE WANTS FULL SERVICE”

Esperanza is the youngest of 11 siblings. While she attended primaria and secundaria, Esperanza made time to work as street vendor along with her brother and father. When their father was diagnosed with cancer Esperanza’s older siblings were living in other states and had families of their own to support. Together, Esperanza and her brother took on full responsibility for their father’s business and continued to support themselves and their parents. Esperanza worried constantly. Her father did not have access to socialized medicine and she worried about not being able to cover his medical expenses. She explained, “We did not have seguro, we lived in extreme poverty.” Esperanza worked as a street vendor for eight years, beginning when she was 11 years old. She left the family business when she married at 19. During that time Esperanza’s father passed away and her mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer.

Esperanza's siblings moved back to Monterrey as soon as they heard their mother had cancer. Together, as a family, they supported each other and cared for Esperanza's mother. This time, her mother had access to socialized medicine through Esperanza's brother who had finally landed a job that offered all legal working benefits.

When Esperanza gave birth to her first child at the Hospital Universitario and suffered post operatory complications her family was there for her. She recalled that she was admitted for an emergency cesarean on the 15th of September, the day of the celebration of Mexican Independence. She was not put under general anesthesia and was aware of what was going on. She could hear the doctors joking around in the operating room. Esperanza and her baby were discharged from the hospital but after a couple of days of feeling sick and burning up in fever she was rushed back. Doctors found out that during the cesarean section they had left gauze and a piece of Esperanza's placenta inside her uterus. One of Esperanza's sister wanted to file a formal complaint but the Director of the Hospital said his staff did not do anything wrong. Esperanza did not want to fight. After 15 days at the hospital she was ready to go home and enjoy her baby.

The memory of Esperanza's first childbirth experience troubled her for a long time. This was the reason that Esperanza waited almost 5 years to get pregnant again. She could still remember the pain she felt when the doctors cleaned her wound and performed a scraping on her without any kind of anesthesia. She explained, "I was afraid of the hospital, I was not afraid of getting pregnant. In fact, after I got better I went by the hospital, I looked at it from the distance and I went like this [she covers her eyes]. It did not matter that I was looking at the hospital from the distance... I was traumatized."

After Esperanza got pregnant for the third time the staff of the Hospital Universitario told her that after her child was born they would have to perform a tubal ligation. Apparently the hospital performs tubal ligations to every woman after their third cesarean. Esperanza agreed to have the procedure done but due to complications during the surgery doctors had to remove her uterus. Esperanza was in shock. When the doctor brought her uterus in a small jar for her to see it she could not stop crying. The doctors convinced Esperanza that it was for the best; now she had less chances of getting cervical cancer, like her mother did. Esperanza still believes that she was a victim of medical malpractice. While she narrated her experience Esperanza did her best not to cry. She explained, “It is like one of my sisters said ‘what is the use of complaining, Esperanza? We do not have money, [whether] we want it or not we are going to end up [at the Hospital Universitario] there.’ And what can one do?”

While Esperanza’s children were growing up she stayed at home looking after them but she always found ways to provide for her family. In her free time Esperanza attended free workshops at community centers where she learned handcrafting techniques and how to prepare food. Esperanza took advantage of the things she had learned at the workshops. She sold handcrafts, Mexican candy and catalog products. It was not a lot of money but she said, “At least [I made money] to buy tortillas and [things] like that.” Esperanza sold catalog products for four years. The flexible schedule left her enough free time to prepare her children for school, help them out with their homework, and have a meal ready when they came home. However, when her oldest child enrolled in secundaria she realized she needed to find another way to earn more money.

When I asked Esperanza if she looked for a better-paid job outside her home she hesitated to answer and instead she continued to talk about her children. She said, “I planned the months [during my pregnancies], planned the years, planned the names [of my children] but I did not plan when they were going to die, right?” Esperanza sobbed and narrated in detail the day that her youngest daughter was injured in her house. It was raining outside and Esperanza decided to stay at home with her two daughters. Due to the rain, one of the walls collapsed and fell on her youngest child. During the accident, Esperanza’s house flooded and she also lost most of her belongings. While her family and friends helped clean the house and replace all that had been lost, Esperanza returned to the Hospital Universitario, which she dreaded. Esperanza’s daughter survived the accident but after a year of numerous procedures she was declared brain dead; she died the day she turned 8 years old.

For over a year Esperanza mourned the death of her daughter and fell into a deep depression. Her pain was such that she thought about killing herself. She used to think, “I am going to cross the highway, I am going to cross [in front of] of a bus, the biggest bus...I wanted to kill myself, I wanted to die.” Esperanza’s older daughter, who survived the accident, also struggled to recover. She started to have trouble at school; she counted the tiles on the floor and talked out loud to herself. Through her daughter’s school Esperanza and her daughter received counseling to help them cope with such a traumatic experience. For the sake of her children that still needed her, Esperanza realized that she had to work on getting better and regain control of her life.

Two years after the accident Esperanza was hired for a job thanks to a friend's recommendation. It was her first time as a household worker. Esperanza's children were old enough to look after themselves and the job helped to keep her busy. Although initially she worked de entrada por salida three days a week for just one employer she was able to get a second job and work the entire week. Esperanza laughed out loud when she recalled the hiring process for one of her jobs. In addition to the interview Esperanza's potential patrona wanted to know where she lived, so she requested letters of recommendations and a copy of all of Esperanza's utility bills. She told the señora, "You are worse than the [interview for the governmental] census." The señora apologized and explained that she had to ask all those questions especially since the city had become so unstable.

Esperanza thinks that the hiring process was unfair; she also wanted to ask questions and get to know more about the people she would be working for. She believes that nowadays workers also need to be more careful. Two years ago one of Esperanza's friends was working at a country house on the outskirts of Monterrey and was killed by a group of armed men who were looking for the patrones. Someone that might have been involved in organized crime also hired Esperanza's brother. One day when he was walking to his job, he was told that the army had surrounded his employer's house. Esperanza's brother walked away and did not return to that job.

Esperanza has worked as a household worker for about six years and overall she has had a good experience. She has worked mostly for college students and has been treated with respect. However, Esperanza has never had legal working benefits like paid

vacations, socialized medicine, or the *Infonavit* (employee benefit that provides mortgage loans for workers). Every Christmas Esperanza received an *aguinaldo*, the Christmas bonus, but the money she received always depended on the economic possibilities of her employers. At some point Esperanza asked one of her employers if she could be registered for Infonavit but not even her patrón had those benefits and he was not registered as an employer. Ever since the accident Esperanza has wanted to move and she was hoping to buy a house through Infonavit. Buying a home is still Esperanza's goal.

Esperanza is deeply disappointed about the situation of violence in Monterrey and believes that the Mexican government is responsible. Esperanza asserted that members of the Zeta's drug cartel are young people that have not had access to education and the government does not care to solve this problem. Esperanza compared Mexico with the United States where there is no such violence and contrary to what happens in Mexico, the United States government aids the citizenry with scholarships, day care, and monthly pensions. She demanded better working conditions and improved socialized medicine.

Towards the end of our conversation Esperanza shared the feeling of emptiness and despair when she had just lost her child, "It was like I went into a tunnel, a darkness, one that had no tomorrow, there was nothing, I felt like... there was no sun, there was no light, there was no one for me, I felt lost and God bless right now I am better." On rainy days Esperanza still reminisces about the accident, as though it happened all over again. However, Esperanza has not given up. Through Viccali's support groups and her faith in God Esperanza has found comfort and a helping hand. She always makes sure to attend as many community activities as she can and works all week long in an effort to keep her

motivated. Esperanza giggled as she admitted she barely has free time to gossip with her neighbors.

But the young man says that he wants full service

In paid household work social networking is very common. Most of the women find jobs through word of mouth and rely on family and friends' recommendations. Esperanza first started to work at an apartment complex where the security guard of the building usually knew who might be hiring. A friend of Esperanza learned from the security guard that a young man at the building was hiring but that he wanted *servicio completo* — full service. Esperanza's friend, a single mother of four, was not sure what this meant and since she really needed a job she accepted the offer. In case her employer wanted sex she thought the patrón would not be interested once he saw her. Esperanza did not know in detail how everything happened but she said, "The patrón did not respect her." She told Esperanza that every time she went to work the young man wanted to have intercourse and that she gave in out of necessity. The patrón told Esperanza's friend, "This is a job, you have to see this as a job." Esperanza worries that her friend might have contracted AIDS or other STD because the patrón refused to wear a condom. After two weeks Esperanza's friend arrived at her job and found out that her patrón had moved out without notifying her.

In another residential area where Esperanza worked she noticed that an old man had a sign outside his house that said "*Se necesita sirvienta*" — maid required. She constantly saw workers coming and going from the house. Apparently household workers

did not last at the job. As Esperanza became friends with other household workers in the area she was told that the señor was a widow and that he harassed every worker that he hired. One woman told Esperanza that while she was mopping the house, the old man came out of his bedroom “like [the biblical] Adam,” naked, and wanted to hug her and kiss her against her will. The woman was able to push him away and she left the job immediately.

Drawing from her working experience and the stories that Esperanza has heard she firmly believes that women household workers are exposed to sexual harassment and rape. Esperanza understands sexual harassment as something that is forced upon women. It is a form of abuse that should be avoided at all costs. For Esperanza, this kind of abuse might be prevented only if women have enough time to escape or walk away. She explained that women workers are common targets “Most of all because there are people that have money...well they do not have principles or [sense of] morality.” In addition, most of the women do not know anything about their employers and they might end up working for a señor *mañoso*, or in other words, a man who lacks moral principles of respect towards women. Esperanza added that some employers wrongly accuse household workers of stealing in an attempt to avoid paying for their work. After threats like this some workers leave without confronting their patrones because of fear of being thrown to jail.

In order to protect herself Esperanza always gives the address of her employers to her family members. That way at least they will know where she is and who might be held responsible if something happens to her. When she has had male employers

Esperanza carefully chooses what she's going to wear; she avoids tight clothes and low cut blouses. Especially during her first days at the job Esperanza pays attention to the employer's movements around the house and avoids being in the same room with the señor.

Esperanza was very critical about governmental and medical authorities. When I asked if she would report a case of sexual harassment or rape to the authorities she hesitated to answer. She explained, "Who knows if I would report it because nowadays authorities are very corrupt. [In the case of a rape] they require the person to report the incident immediately and come forward while there is still physical evidence. If it is not done like that, then the case does not proceed, so what can one do?" Esperanza knows of a case of a baby boy that was raped and although his mother reported the situation at the Hospital Universitario nothing was done. The baby's mother did not rush her son to the hospital right away. Esperanza labeled this situation as an injustice. She believes that the mother of the child was in her right to inspect the baby and provide initial care before going to the hospital. With a hit of sarcasm Esperanza asserted, "Well a doctor cannot be fooled, a doctor knows when a person has been raped so with or without the waste [men's sperm] they should act [upon the case of rape]."

In a very serious tone Esperanza said that sexual harassment happens everywhere. During the time that Esperanza's daughter was at the hospital she heard about a case of sexual violence. Esperanza explained that some people that arrive at the Hospital Universitario come from out of state or rural areas and the hospital usually provides them with food stamps during their stay. A patients' family member confided in Esperanza

when the family member shared that a security guard offered to give her food stamps, but he did this to trick her. When the woman went to claim her food stamps the man sexually assaulted her. Esperanza emphasized, “The seguro is the worst there is and there is sexual harassment, they should investigate accordingly.”

Esperanza is 50 years old and was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León. She is married and has 2 children. Another child died after an accident. Esperanza has 11 siblings and finished secundaria. She identifies as Christian. At the present time Esperanza has access to el seguro through one of her children.

MARGARITA: “WITH HIS LOOK, HE TOLD YOU EVERYTHING”

Ever since Margarita was young she has seen her parents work and struggle to meet the needs of the family. With sadness she recalled that her mother was never around. Margarita's mother worked cleaning houses all week; sometimes she worked at three houses in one day. Margarita's father worked as a driver for a public transportation company and had a flexible schedule. As a result he was in charge of cleaning and cooking for Margarita and her two siblings. When Margarita got her period for the first time her father explained what was happening to her. She asserted, "It is almost like my dad was my mom."

When she was 12 years old, Margarita started to work without her parents' knowledge because she knew that money was scarce. She lied to her parents because they would not allow her to work at such a young age otherwise. Margarita would tell her

parents she would be at the library after school when in fact she was out working. She giggled when she told me that her parents would believe anything she said because she had always been a straight “A” student. Although Margarita had no work experience as a household worker, she remembered the kind of things that her mother did when she kept her company during her working hours. Her first job opportunity came up when her mother's former employer came to her house looking for Margarita's mother. Margarita did not know this at that time, but it turned out that her mother was avoiding her patrona because she did not want to work for her anymore. With her salary Margarita was able to avoid putting more stress on her parents in case she needed new shoes or school supplies. Since she could not tell her parents that she had money of her own she made up stories: "I told her, 'ay, you know what ama? I was awarded this money for getting an A.' I even put [the money] in an envelope. 'The money was awarded by the school.' Of course my mom shouted [out] of happiness...and my dad [was] even more happy [while] they ignored that I had been working."

Throughout secundaria Margarita worked *de entrada por salida*, three times a week, for her mother's former patrona. Margarita will never forget her first days of work. Given that it had been nearly six months that no one had been hired to clean the house she encountered piles of dirty dishes, tons of dust, and moldy bathrooms. Beside cleaning the house and doing the laundry, Margarita's employer asked her to do other things around the house that she did not consider as part of her job. In 1995, Margarita received 30 pesos for each day of work, equivalent to \$ 4 US dollars . She explained, "But I always thought to myself, I am young. I felt full of energy and beside [I was in] need I

guess." Now that Margarita is older she thinks that her first employer gave her a lot of work and did not pay her enough. She asserted, "She took advantage of me because she saw that I was young." During four years Margarita worked for the señora without being discovered by her parents. Instead of riding the bus, Margarita walked all the way to her job. She knew that her father or one of his co-workers could spot her riding the bus. One day while Margarita was washing the patrona's car on the front porch her father drove by and spotted her. Once her secret was uncovered Margarita was not allowed to work anymore.

Upon graduating from secundaria with honors Margarita knew she wanted to continue studying; she wanted to become a nurse. She had seen her mother work all her life and she was determined to avoid paid household work. Margarita used to think to herself, "Ay, when tomorrow comes I want to be a mom and I do not want to be like that, I want my daughters to enjoy me." Margarita's parents wanted her to be a full time student but she could not bear to see them struggling to pay for her studies.

When Margarita enrolled at a *Preparatoria Técnica de Enfermería* (equivalent to Nursing Trade School) she told her mom, "You know what mamá? I am going to go [to work], whether you like it or not." During the time that Margarita studied and upon graduating she alternated between paid household work and nursing jobs. Whenever money was scarce or she had trouble finding a job as a nurse she always went back to work for her first employer doing household work. Overall, as Margarita gained more work experience she became more aware about her rights as a worker. She "realized that a worker has to have a seguro and a good salary according to the job that you are doing."

When Margarita went back to work for the third time with her first employer she knew better. This time around the señora paid her \$160 pesos per day, equivalent to \$ 17 US dollars at the time (1999). Nonetheless, Margarita explained that her employer always wanted to make the most of it. Margarita now older and with more work experience knew better. During December and because her employer was going to throw a party she asked Margarita to paint the walls of the dinning room. Margarita did not want to do it; she was concerned that she would ruin the walls since she had never done that kind of work before. Margarita did it anyway but she did speak up about the amount of work. If she was going to paint the walls she might not be able to finish other chores around the house. She told her employer, "Either I paint the walls or I chop the fruit." Margarita left the job after six months when she was four months pregnant. She explained, "Well, [low pitch of voice] I ended up pregnant right, to be exact, I ended up pregnant but it did not show and I got married."

After Margarita had given birth to her first child she started working again as a nanny de entrada por salida. Margarita's mother and her mother-in-law cared for her baby while she was at work. Margarita and her husband were paying rent because they did not want to live with her mother or her mother-in-law. Upon reflection, she recalled that because she got pregnant her husband had not been able to pursue a bachelor's degree in Nursing. With her new job Margarita's husband was able to return to school as they both continued to work to support their new family. Because her employer owned a business and was away from home during work hours, Margarita babysat her employer's daughter, a 3-year-old, at the patronas' business. At the office, her employer had a room full of toys

that was especially designated for the child. With time Margarita bonded with the little girl but she struggled at first. She explained, "The girl was a little bit like a brat. I struggled to get her to like me because she was like those spoiled [children]. [The child said things] like, 'Do not watch the TV, look at me only.' She was a lot like that." At times the little girl would order Margarita to stay still. If Margarita moved, the child cried and said that she had hit her. When the child threw a tantrum she would tell Margarita, "Do not touch me because you have *chusma* [rabble]."

At this job Margarita had to endure humiliation from other female employers that did administrative work for her patrona. Margarita explained, "Sometimes they said, 'Margarita there are popcorn scattered there.' [Popcorn] they had been eating. 'Pick them up.'" I said well, 'But I am not your sirvienta (maid).'" [Margarita laughs] I stood like that, right, like well, but I am not your sirvienta." Margarita remembers that when a male worker was hired, the other women planned a prank. They told the male employee to hit on Margarita in order to provoke a fight between Margarita and her husband who always picked her up from work. Another nanny that was there caring for an employee's child warned Margarita about the other workers' ulterior motives. In order to protect herself, Margarita kept her distance and avoided talking to him.

Margarita was also subjected to discriminatory practices when she attended birthday parties. Although nannies attended these social gatherings to care for the children, at times the host of the party told them to wait outside. In particular, Margarita remembers that they were told to leave the area where the party was being held because the host did not want nannies to appear on the birthday video. Depending on the host of

the party, nannies and household workers were offered food or beverages. She also witnessed small children being rude at their own nannies. In shock, Margarita described the scene as she told me, "Well, she threw the coca-cola on her feet, [then the girl cracked her fingers] 'órale, bring me an orange soda like hers'." With time the señora's daughter had grown close to Margarita and demanded her friends to be respectful. Margarita remembers that during a play date one of the guests ordered something to drink. The little girl told her friend, "Her name is Margarita, do not call her 'nanny'."

Margarita appreciated her employer's fairness when it came to salary and working benefits. Margarita received two weeks paid vacations during *Semana Santa* (Easter weekend) and aguinaldo. When she got sick she could stay at home and her workday was not reduced from her salary. In particular, Margarita remembered when her daughter got chicken pox, the señora allowed her to stay at home to care for her child for 2 weeks with pay. These kinds of benefits are very rare in paid household work. However, Margarita did mention that at times her employer was verbally abusive. The señora would talk back or yell at her when she would tell Margarita to hurry up. Sometimes Margarita felt like crying. After one of these abusive events, around 2005, the employer compensated Margarita for the harsh treatment she gave by paying Margarita an extra \$200 pesos (equivalent to \$ 20 US dollars at the time). Margarita told her husband, "Hey, this time she paid me more but I think [she did it] because she yelled at me on Tuesday. My husband said, 'Well, [it looks] like she is yelling [at you] very often.'" Margarita left the job 2 years later when her employer went out of business. The señora notified Margarita

to look for another job several months in advance. According to Margarita, her employer was mostly kind and the job paid well.

Margarita has been in her current job, caring for an elderly couple, for nearly a year. Margarita is working a 12-hour shift and is not able to spend the night with her family except for Saturdays, which is her day off. There are times when she does not sleep at all because she must stay alert in case her employers need her services. Margarita reflected, "There, well, they do not offer the seguro but I am paid a little bit...a lot better!" Margarita has never been paid this much. When I interviewed her in 2008, she was earning \$2,700 pesos per week, which represents \$10,800 pesos per month (equivalent to a monthly income of \$ 1,080 US dollars). With her salary, Margarita is covering nearly all of her family's living expenses. Although Margarita's husband has a job, their living expenses skyrocketed when their daughter enrolled in kindergarten. Margarita and her husband are also using a hefty portion of their salaries to finish paying for their new home.

Three months prior to our interview, Margarita found out she was pregnant and she worried about being fired. When she was hired, the working arrangements were made through her patrones' daughter-in-law who informed Margarita that she would be fired if she became pregnant. Surprisingly, however, when Margarita told the señora about her pregnancy, she was supportive. Margarita was told that she could stay at the job until she gave birth, and afterwards they could work out an arrangement.

Although Margarita's employer was seemingly able to accommodate Margarita's needs at the time, she is planning to leave her job as soon as her baby is born. She wants

to make up for all the time that she has not been able to spend with her first daughter, now four years old. With sadness, Margarita told me that she was not around when her daughter learned to walk, she explained, "She did not say mamá to me, she said mamá to her grandmothers." However, Margarita and her husband worry about losing their somewhat stable economic situation. She explained, "We were surprised because we were not expecting [the pregnancy] but like my husband says, and I agree, we are going to lose everything again like we did with the first [child]." At the time of our interview Margarita's husband was close to graduating. She hopes that he will be able to find a better-paid job that would allow her to be a stay at home mom.

With his look, he told you everything

Margarita laughed as she tried to explain what sexual harassment meant. According to Margarita sexual harassment happens when a man tries to go too far with a woman, especially if he is putting pressure or forcing an encounter. She identified sexual harassment as a *falta de respeto*, or to be disrespectful, which might occur in the form of words, a glance, or inappropriate touching. She asserted that anyone could sexually harass a woman, even a boyfriend. Margarita giggled when she recalled how her mother used to lecture her about the importance of demanding respect from men or *darse a respetar*. While Margarita was growing up she feared that if someone sexually assaulted her, her mother would hold Margarita accountable. As a result Margarita has always avoided eliciting sexual attention from men. She learned to be discreet and keeps her distance whenever she is around men.

Margarita recalled a story she once heard about a friend of her mother. She was working as a household worker along with one of Margarita's aunts and she told them that the son of the patrón attempted to rape her. The man was drunk at the time and when she realized what was going on he was already in her bedroom, on top of her. Although he threatened to kill her if she yelled the woman managed to hit him on the head with an alarm clock. When the patrones heard the commotion they came downstairs. While she was still wearing her nightgown, visibly torn due to the assault, the young woman was fired. After this incident she went back to her hometown.

Having heard these kinds of stories Margarita knew that she needed to be alert when she worked as a household worker. On Margarita's first job as a household worker she spotted a male employee spying on her while she changed clothes in the *cuarto de servicio*, the modest living space assigned to household workers. When he returned to the job two days later the employee insisted in coming into the kitchen to get some water. Margarita thought it was strange to ask for water four times in just one hour. Although she was young at the time, Margarita devised a strategy to protect herself. When he attempted to enter the house for the fifth time, Margarita closed the door and told him that he could pour water from the tap in the backyard. At the time her employer was not home. Frightened, Margarita called her employer and told her that she was scared. The señora said, "Why would you be scared? You are old enough, you should not be scared."

Margarita identified the two incidents as sexual harassment but she did not leave the job because she knew that the employee would leave soon. Margarita omitted to tell her patrona that she was scared of the male employee because she realized the señora did

not care about her. Years later when Margarita returned to that job and the señora's daughter was 15 years old the patrona emphasized that her kid could not be left alone while male employees worked around the house. Margarita explained, "It was like, while you are not related to me, while you work for me, I do not care what happens to you. So I thought, *qué picuda* [arrogant, overbearing], I was that age [back then] and how come when it came to me being alone with a male employee she did not care."

Margarita also heard about sexual harassment problems when she worked as an assistant nurse at a private hospital. There, a male patient harassed two co-workers and was also disrespectful to Margarita. Margarita and the rest of the staff were told that this was a special patient and only certain staff were allowed in the room. Margarita thinks that the patient was either a government official or a member of the organized crime. In shock, she described what she saw in the patient's room: "You [walked] in and [they had] suitcases with money there on the table, I mean and the señor [was] in bed and the señora [told him], 'Give me money because I am going to buy this' and they left and the señor [was] counting and counting money...I mean [it was something] excessive."

Because the patient argued that porn helped to ease his pain, the hospital allowed him to watch adult movies. When it was Margarita's turn to care for the patient she stood in awe as she heard the audio in the background. She had never seen or experienced something like that; in several occasions Margarita said it was traumatic for her. Vividly she recalled that the patient walked naked all the way to the bathroom when it was time for his bath. Margarita told him, "Ay oiga, hey you, cover up with a towel. 'No, this is like a shower at my house, I [feel] like I am at home'...I remember I told him, you are not

in your house, we are at a hospital and we are women the ones that are coming to treat you." Margarita described the patient as despot and rude. He constantly stared at Margarita in a way that made her feel uncomfortable; it was almost as if he undressed her with his eyes. Margarita identified his glance as sexual harassment because it felt very sexual and inappropriate. The patient also groped one of the nurses and told another that he wanted to fulfill a sexual fantasy with her.

Margarita's two co-workers immediately requested to be released from the patient's service and shared their experiences with the rest of the personnel in order to alert them and look out for each other. Interestingly, they both filed a sexual harassment complaint through the hospital's administration but only until the patient had been discharged. Margarita explained that before patients leave the hospital they are asked to evaluate their overall experience, including the staff. Depending on how well employees rank they receive cash prizes and other incentives. Moreover, whenever a complaint is filed the supervisor is required to investigate and talk to the patient, in which case the employee's confidentiality is not guaranteed. Altogether, the hospital's policy and handling of cases like these put employees in a disadvantaged position. Margarita had also heard her supervisor say that as long as patients were paying they could do pretty much whatever they wanted. Before the patient left the hospital he compensated each nurse with \$1,800 pesos (equivalent to \$ 180 US dollars at the time, in 2003). He actually said, "Thank you for putting up with me."

Two of Margarita's friends who have worked as office assistants have also experienced sexual harassment at the workplace. Both of them were verbally harassed

and received unwanted sexual attention. One of Margarita's friends was required to wear skirts and low-cut blouses. Her boss used the word "sexy" to describe the kind of clothes that she had to wear on the job. To stop the harassment both of them quit their jobs but none of them pressed charges. They feared being blacklisted and not being able to find a job elsewhere. Interestingly, Margarita described one of her friends as *chiflada*, meaning that she likes to joke around men and does not care if they are disrespectful. In Margarita's opinion her friend was responsible for being harassed at her job because she does not establish boundaries whenever she is around men.

On her way to her current job, some of the gardeners catcall Margarita as she walks by several houses. She described the scene, "It is a constantly whistling, I mean... they go like this, 'pst, pst, goodbye chiquita'" Margarita shared that the men would whistle, throw kisses, and make suggestive facial expressions like winking or licking their lips as she walked by them. Although Margarita talks back to the men, she does not feel safe. She has changed her route to and from her employer's home in an effort to avoid them. She explained, "I walk by the Church or sometimes I go into the Church and I make a short cut and then I cross myself."

Margarita is 27 years old. She was born and raised in Monterrey, Nuevo León. She is currently married and has a daughter. At the time of her interview she was expecting her second child. Margarita has two older siblings. She graduated from Nursing Trade School and has access to el seguro through her husband. She identifies as Catholic.

Chapter 2: Analysis

ENTRE MUJERES: CAUTIONARY TALES

All of the women I interviewed were keenly aware of the fact that, as women, they were at risk of experiencing some form of sexual violence. Most of them had information about the incidence of sexual violence against women, either from the news or popular TV shows, such as “Lo que callamos las mujeres” and “Mujer, casos de la vida real.” Hosted by famous Mexican actress Silvia Pinal, the latter aired in Mexico since 1980s (and for more than 20 years), and it was the first of its kind. Both TV shows depict real stories lived by Mexican women about a variety of issues affecting their lives including but not limited to domestic violence, incest, sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, and abortion. To some extent these shows help make visible the problems affecting the lives of women, issues and concerns traditionally silenced in Mexican society.

Conversations about sexuality and sexual violence also take place within the mother-daughter relationship. When they were younger, most of my informants recalled being warned by their mothers about the possibility of being sexually assaulted on the streets, at school, or within their families. Interestingly, these teachings were not about the importance of preserving virginity per se – in fact none of my participants mentioned the concept – instead they described their mother’s lessons which aimed at protecting themselves from men’s sexual advances, unwanted pregnancies or extreme situations of violence such as incest or rape.

Overall, being respected or demanding respect from men was the principal teaching that my informant's mothers taught them. Like Gloria González-López has argued, "in México a young and single woman's body is controlled by the family. An expression of patriarchal morality, a sophisticated ethic of family respect or *respeto a la familia* links female sexuality to family honor and respect" (2007, 228). In this sense, a woman's sexuality and thus, preserving premarital virginity becomes a family affair. Depending on the extent that gender inequality is more or less present within a community, women's premarital virginity might be considered of utmost importance. This is especially true for rural communities or people who do not have access to education or social venues in which gender inequality is questioned. In the case of my participants, it seemed that their mothers promoted both an ethic of family respect and "an ethic of *protección y cuidado personal* (protection and care) represented by sexual moderation" (González-López, 2003, 219).

The sexual education these women received aimed at avoiding pregnancies out of wedlock, which could bring shame to the family, as well as assuring that their daughter's could marry well. According to González-López (2003), in patriarchal societies such as Mexico, a woman's virginity becomes a commodity and acquires a social exchange value. Thus, virginity becomes a form of social capital, or *capital femenino*, that is traded for better life conditions via marriage.

When Valentina first started to work, and especially when she spent the night at the employer's home, her mother began to keep track of her menstruation cycles to make sure she did not get pregnant. Margarita also recalled her mother's teachings about the

importance of *darse a respetar*, or demanding respect from men and avoiding at all costs any inappropriate touching. Similarly, when my participants became mothers they taught their daughters about sexuality in an effort to protect them from violence.

When my informants entered in the occupation of household work, they also began to hear about what went on at the employers' homes behind closed doors. Most of the women had heard through friends or other women in their families about household workers being raped by the patrón or the son of the employers. Without exception, all of my informants said that household workers are at risk of being sexually harassed. In fact, most of the women that I interviewed had experienced some form of sexual harassment at their jobs and had heard numerous stories from acquaintances, friends, and relatives about the issue. These stories or cautionary tales warned them and also confirmed the dangers they could face, especially if they worked *de planta* and thus, expected to spend the night. Lucía and Valentina actually knew several women, acquaintances and close friends that had been raped while working in domestic service. Other women, like Belén and Margarita, had friends working in other occupations in which they also experienced sexual harassment.

Many of the women that participated in my study experienced emotions of anguish and fear as they started to work in paid household work. As girls or young women with few work experience they were not only afraid of being reprimanded if their housework did not meet the standards and expectations of their patronas; they also feared being targets of rape or sexual harassment by their employers. Those like Lucía and Belén, who spent the night at their employers' home, were in constant fear. Lucía

repeatedly told her mom that she did not want to spend the night at the patrón's house, but she was forced to stay nonetheless. Belén on the other hand, endured 5 years working for the same employer, even though every night, when she went back to her room, someone knocked on her door. She suspected that the father of her patrona was the person who engaged in this behavior, which induced fear in her.

As I conducted my interviews it became clear that most of the women had experienced some sort of sexual violence, whether sexual harassment at the workplace, incest, sexual assault or rape. A co-worker sexually assaulted Lucía when she worked at a maquila and one of her uncles attempted to rape her when she was a girl; Belén and Valentina were sexually harassed by their patrones while working in domestic service and Margarita experienced sexual harassment at several jobs, both in domestic service and nursing jobs. Victoria and Aurora, whose stories are not included here, are also survivors of sexual violence. An uncle attempted to rape Victoria when she was about 5 years old, and Aurora was constantly raped since she was 12-years-old by her mother's boyfriend.

These women's stories, and those of other women they knew, illustrate Liz Kelly's (1987) feminist reflections on the continuum of violence in terms of incidence, which explains the range of forms of abuse that women experience in their lifetimes. Kelly's concept of the continuum of violence draws attention to the range of abusive acts that constitute expressions of violence against women. Moreover, this theorization of sexual violence places rape as the most extreme situation at one end of the continuum. Whether the case refers to sexual harassment or rape, understanding violence as a

continuum is helpful in order to recognize these experiences as expressions of male dominance and control over women. Sexual harassment occurred in many ways and took different forms in these women's lives. Women described men's attempts to manipulate them in order to get physically close to them (i.e. Valentina's employer promised to buy her anything she wanted), unwanted sexual attention (Belén's patrón tried to guess her jeans size while he scanned her body), caressing that was not entirely sexual but felt inappropriate (i.e. Belén's patrón asked her to light a cigarette for him and caressed her hand), sexual assault, flashing, and finally rape.

On the other hand, the continuum of experience of heterosexual sex to rape explains women's experiences that "are not either consenting or rape, but exist on a continuum moving from choice to pressure to coercion to force" (Kelly 1987, 54). This seems to be the case of Lucía's and Esperanza's friends who, like they said, "gave in" to their employer's sexual advances and finally engaged in sexual intercourse with them because they could not afford to lose their jobs.

As women heard about the dangers they could face while working as household workers they shared information with one another and developed strategies to protect themselves. Through these conversations women learned about some of the dangers that they are exposed to within the culture of domestic service, yet they also supported one another as they explored ways to navigate their own work experiences. In order to avoid exploitative working conditions and sexual harassment, the women relied mainly on social networking. This is similar to what Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) and González-López (2005) found in their research with Mexican immigrant women: women rely on other

women and the networks that emerge in the process as they decipher their social contexts and circumstances in their California immigrant communities. Most women mentioned they felt more comfortable and safe working for an employer that had been recommended by someone they knew; they felt employers could be held accountable more easily. All of the women that I interviewed agreed that young women who migrate from rural areas to Monterrey might be at greater risk of being targets of sexual harassment by their employers because they lack solid social networks.

For the most part, women learn about potential employers through family and friends. They also receive advice from their peers and rely on them for work recommendations. Young girls, for example, usually enter this occupation and learn about the job through their mothers. Some of my participants remember keeping their mothers company at their jobs and learning about household tasks while they were kids. From an early age, most of the women found their first job as household workers via their mothers or other female family members. Aurora had her first job at the age of 7; Esperanza at the age of 11; Margarita at the age of 12; Valentina at the age of 13; Belén and Lucía at the age of 15; Rosa, Luisa and Teresa at the age of 16. Only Rosario and Victoria started to work after they had reached a legal age, 19 and 20 respectively.

In fact for immigrant women who are employed as household workers in Los Angeles, “informal social networks [...] do more than facilitate recruitment and hiring. They are important because they create a labor market and they serve to regulate the occupation” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 61). In this sense, women also shared information

about what represented a fair salary, the type of chores that employer's usually expected of them, and strategies to negotiate benefits and pay raises.

In spite of knowing that sexual harassment is a risk, the women continued to work in paid household work. For some it happened as something "natural" because their mothers also worked in this occupation since they were young girls, hence the women were socialized and prepared to follow their mother's steps. In addition, they did not have access to education or formal training and thus, could not aspire to a higher paying job. As poor, working class women with limited education and job opportunities they enter the occupation out of need. It is at last, a choice-less choice. Although some women said that they *chose* to work in this occupation, in reality their social networks did not offer a variety of work opportunities. They did not have other alternatives to choose from.

POR NECESIDAD: I DID IT OUT OF NECESSITY

Throughout the interviewing process the expression "por necesidad," or out of necessity, kept coming up. My participants used this term to explain both why they *had to* work in this occupation and why they tolerated a situation of harassment for extended periods of time.

For the most part, the economic situation of the family was key in deciding if girls had to work outside the house. With only two exceptions, the participants in this study started to work when they were underage, that is, younger than 18 years old. While they were growing up, most of the women were introduced into household work, either by *choice* or through their parents demand. In some cases, the participants' mothers

introduced their daughters into the occupation alongside their sisters, and the mothers used their children's salaries as part of the family's income. Working de planta — having a “permanent job” — served as a way of satisfying their most basic needs such as access to food and shelter. Spending the night at an employer's home seemed the best option available, especially for those who came from large families struggling to satisfy the needs of each individual. While Valentina worked de planta, she had access to a lot of amenities that she did not have at home, such as watching TV.

For some, quitting the job because they were being exploited or sexually harassed was not always a possibility, or at least they did not feel entitled to make this decision. This was especially true while they were young and their families depended on their salaries. Leaving the job was not a personal decision they could make. Although Lucía did not want to spend the night at the employer's home, her mother forced her to stay. Quitting could also get them in trouble with their mothers who usually made the working arrangements. This was the case of Lucía's sister who stormed out of her employer's home after being fondled by the son of the patrona. Although she protected herself from sexual violence at work, Lucía's sister faced violence in the hands of her mother who slapped her and repeatedly hit her using a belt for being disobedient and causing her family to lose income. As children, most of the time they felt they had to comply and become subordinate to their parents' demands. Moreover, within the cultures of domestic service some women workers are taught by their mothers to show deference and comply with whatever their employers say. No matter their age, most of my informants confessed that they were afraid of speaking up at their jobs. When Lucía stood up to her sister, her

mother warned that, “las señoras should be respected and that one must behave according to what they say.” This pattern echoes González-López’s research with Mexican immigrant women and men, which exposed the ways in which patriarchy may at times be reproduced through motherhood. González-López discovered that mothers would openly reject and stigmatize a son’s girlfriend if she was suspected to lack the moral values expected for a future daughter-in-law, as a future mother of the grandchildren (2005, 117-122). Similarly, the mothers of some of the women that I interviewed exposed their daughters to ideologies and practices that furthered oppressed them as women. In the case of Lucia’s sister, the mother blamed and punished a daughter for her own sexual victimization.

As minors they also had few options of employment. Teresa, who was 16 years old when she was first employed, had to attain a false ID to get a job at a maquiladora in which minors were not hired. The law prohibits hiring minors under 14 years old and household work is practically excluded from legal protection, these two factors may expose domestic worker women and girls to all forms of economic abuse and exploitation (Thais, 2005). Although some have argued that not all women in paid household work are exposed to sexual violence (Goldsmith, 1998), the illegality of child labor and the marginality of domestic work within the legal system may create conditions of sexual vulnerability for girls and women working in this occupation.

All of my informants started to work at a very young age, as early as 7 in the case of Aurora, which also limited their access to education and consequently their chances of widening their job opportunities. All of the participants completed elementary school but

few had the opportunity to continue their studies. Victoria almost finished high school and managed to get a diploma in computer science. However, she never obtained a job in this area of specialty because the school she attended lacked rigor and she felt poorly prepared. Margarita, for instance, was determined to move away from household work and although she struggled she was able to obtain a diploma in Nursing. Nonetheless, when she had a hard time finding a job as a nurse she always went back to paid household work out of financial need. Margarita asserted, “Nobody likes cleaning bathrooms but I needed the job.”

Research about children working in domestic service in Monterrey has demonstrated that, although they enter the occupation with hopes of continuing their studies, the working conditions (i.e. long working hours) do not facilitate studying, or their employers did not allow for it (Arenal, Ramos & Maldonado, 1997). In fact, employers of household workers prefer to hire young women who lack work experience and are more naïve and malleable (Thais, 2005). The idea is to keep them disempowered and easily controlled for exploitation.

Escaping violence in their families of origin added up as a motivation for working outside their homes while they were young and worked *de planta*; such was the case for Belén and Aurora. Aurora’s story, which is not included here, was particularly moving. She was born and raised in the Colonia Independencia, along with her 14 siblings. She is one of the oldest of all her siblings. Aurora was seven years old when her mother initiated her in paid household work, while simultaneously attending school. After school, Aurora helped her mother conduct household work for several *patronas* and when she turned 14

years old she started to work de planta. Aurora's brothers did not have to work. For Aurora's mother it was absolutely important that her sons completed their studies — but not her daughters. While being exposed to patriarchal family ethics promoting double standards of morality and gender inequality, Aurora was told that as a girl she was “*una carga*” — a burden. Aurora had only 2 choices: either work in order to provide for her living expenses and those of the family, or find a good suitor and get married. Aurora's parents were separated. Her father had an alcoholism problem and her mother's boyfriend repeatedly raped Aurora when she was around 12 years old.

Aurora wanted to get away from home as a way to cope with the sexual violence she experienced at home. Spending the night at her employer's home made her feel safe. When she had free time, and she was not being supervised by her patrones, she sneaked into the señor's private library and grabbed a book. Work allowed Aurora to escape her mother's abusive boyfriend and lose herself in the stories she found in these books. Thanks to the money she made she was able to put herself through secundaria. At the time of our interview she was separated from her husband and was raising two young daughters.

Aurora was lucky in the sense that she was not sexually harassed at work, and managed to escape violence in her family of origin via household work. However, at times women found themselves trapped between violence at home and at work, as was the case for Belén who managed to escape family violence yet found herself exploited and sexually assaulted at one of her jobs.

Overall, exiting paid household work was almost impossible for all of my informants. Although some had worked in other occupations, usually at maquiladoras, once they became mothers they had a hard time adjusting their working schedules to match their responsibilities as mothers and wives. This was especially true for those whose husbands were not supportive of their wives working outside the home based on the idea that their wives would neglect their children and their own housework. Sexism and gender oppression within marriage took many forms and also limited the women's options of employment and mobility. Aurora's husband left her and their two daughters because, as she explained, "She was unable to give him a son." Her mother in law and several of her husband's female relatives refused to babysit Aurora's children while she worked because they believed it was inappropriate for a married woman to work outside her home. They argued that women who worked outside their homes did it in order to fool around with other men or to find someone else to marry.

Whether women were in need economically or they needed to escape violence in their families of origin, women entered household service work in hopes of improving their living conditions. However, they frequently found themselves tolerating other forms of abuse by their employers. For many of the women, the precarious economic situations they were under impeded them from leaving their jobs even though they were being sexually harassed. Lucía explained, "If I am in need I'm going to tolerate it. I am going to tolerate while my husband finds a job, something, and then I will leave but I will endure the circumstances, if I do not have [money or a job] I have to put up with the situation." Thus, economic necessity makes women in household service work easy targets for

coercion and rape, much like Lucía's friend who confessed that she finally gave in into sex with the patrón because she could not afford to be fired.

The stories of these women indicate that the domestic work industry is by far a choiceless choice. Mexican patriarchal society offers limited options to women in general but it is even worse for women living in poor working class families. Their social networks offer limited options of mobility and most were socialized to work in an occupation that has been historically devalued. Moreover, gender oppression and sexism within their families also limited their options.

Although the above social, economic, and legal conditions make women in paid household work vulnerable, women's life experiences are complex and they are not necessarily passive victims of these conditions. Many of these hardworking women felt proud about their work, and above all else, they were especially proud of being able to provide for their families in spite of whatever personal challenge. These stories illustrate that women are aware of the challenging dangers and risks they may face, and as they survive, they decipher the risks of sexual violence (in the jobs and also in their homes), provide for themselves and actively contribute to the family economy, and explore ways to improve their living conditions within the shadows of society.

PODEROSO CABALLERO, ES DON DINERO: RACE AND CLASS RELATIONS IN PAID HOUSEHOLD WORK

In addition to other social and cultural factors, economic necessity is another contributing factor that makes women household workers vulnerable to sexual

harassment and sexual violence in general. The ways in which the occupation has been constructed in Mexican society, as well as the contrasting class and race disparity between employer and domestic worker, facilitates economic exploitation and other forms of abuse by patrones like sexual harassment. In addition, the Mexican legal system provides inadequate protection and enforcement, which favors employers over women workers.

For the most part, middle and upper class married women have depended on the labor of working class women in order to fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers such as childcare and housework. Although nowadays, domestic workers are not necessarily from indigenous communities or illiterate (Goldsmith, 1998), most of the women enter the occupation while they are young and come from poor families. Women who can afford to buy these women's labor "elevated their status by supervising the work of servants" (Romero 1992, 54), while devaluing the status of their workers. In other words, domestic workers become the devalued "extension" of the housewife, as they take on household work that is also undervalued in patriarchal societies.

Without exception, the employer has always belonged to the dominant class and race placing women domestic workers in a subordinate position and thus constructed as the "other." A domestic worker becomes the "other" through the type of work that they do and by their subject positionality in terms of gender, class, and race, as well as other social conditions, including but not limited to the regional and cultural background (rural vis-à-vis urban). Although some employers might say they consider the women they hire as members of their own families (Phillips, 2006), they simultaneously construct

household work and the women that are hired to perform it as dirty and inferior (Palmer, 1998). While the women narrated their work experiences they repeatedly identified comments and attitudes from their employers, which associated them with derogatory adjectives such as *sucia* (dirt) or *ser sucia* (being dirty). At one of her jobs, Aurora was told by her patrona to wash her hands with Clorox instead of regular soap and Valentina was instructed by her patrona's mother to do the laundry without coming in direct contact with the clothes. The daughter of one of her patronas reprimanded Margarita after she had helped her toddler wash his hands. The mother of the child told Margarita, "I doubt you ever wash your hands." Although Margarita had been able to improve her job status by getting formal nursing training, as a working class woman the señora still considered her to be dirty.

Several working arrangements also emphasized women's otherness and employers constantly made distinctions based on the women's class and race. Both Valentina and Aurora were assigned a separate plate, fork and glass for their use, and they were not allowed to use the dinner set and glassware that their employers used. Out of the 11 women that I interviewed only Valentina could sit at the table and eat with one of the families she once worked for. The women that once worked *de planta* said, without exception, that they slept at the *cuarto de servicio*, which was always located away from the main house and usually lacked commodities (i.e. A/C, fan, heating, among others) that their employers had in their own rooms. Other employers like those of Belén and her sister fed them spoiled food or did not provide any meal although they both worked *de planta*. One of the women that I interviewed, whose story is not included here, said she

constantly felt belittled and denigrated by one of her employers. When the señora was around and although she tried initiating a conversation with her, the señora avoided talking to her. She said, “I felt invisible, it was like I was a robot, a slave.” Belén’s powerful words echo the experiences of other household workers, like the African American women that Judith Rollins interviewed who also felt as if they were invisible; as if they did not exist (Rollins, 1985, 224)

All of my informants were mestizas, but most of them had slight indigenous features such as brown skin, brown eyes and dark hair. A few of the participants had lighter skin but were poor nonetheless. According to Judith Rollins (1985), invisibility is race-related. For the most part, whites often perceive people of color as invisible or non-human. This phenomenon is exacerbated within the employer-domestic worker relationship. The fact that employers can choose to ignore the presence of the domestic worker emphasizes the power of employers to deem others as non-persons or non-existent. The dehumanization of the woman worker by her employer leads to exploitation and abuse much like the experiences of my informants. From this standpoint, if women domestic workers are not considered human beings, why would their employers have any consideration for them? This confirms Garduño Andrade’s research in México in the mid 1970s. Garduño Andrade reported that one of the employers that she interviewed defined “la sirvienta” [servant] as “an inferior being that needed to be treated with a firm hand” (1979, 100). In other words, although “this mechanism is functioning at all times when whites and people of color interact in society, it takes on an exaggerated form when the

person of color also holds a low-status occupational and gender position – an unfortunate convergence of statuses” (Rollins 1985, 212).

The working arrangements and conditions described above indicate the extent to which women household workers’ most basic needs are denied. For instance, the employers who fed some of the women spoiled food or ignored the women, basically stripped the women of their humanity — they were in essence dehumanized. Furthermore, conceptualizing the women and the work that they do as dirty marked their bodies as rapeable. In the words of Andrea Smith (2005), “because Indian bodies are ‘dirty,’ they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapeable,’ and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count” (10). In Mexican society, people of indigenous and African descent are considered inferior beings, animal like, and almost non-persons (Mondragón Barrios, 1999), whereas European ancestral phenotypes like white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes are desirable and celebrated. For instance, it is not unusual to witness the presence of women who have become invisible and frequently ignored in the busy streets of many cities in the country: indigenous women carrying a child on their backs (the so called “Marías”) while asking for *limosna*. Although México and its population have evolved racially since the colonial years, racism (and its multiple and complex expressions) is still prevalent and pernicious.

In short, women household worker’s multiple marginalities make them vulnerable to being perceived as ‘objects,’ exposing them to sexual violence. Similarly to what Antonia I. Castañeda (1993) has argued in order to explain sexual violence against Amerindian women during the Spanish Conquest in California, within the working

relationship women (housewife and household worker) are placed in opposition to one another creating a dichotomy that constructs a “sexual morality,” which values or devalues women identifying them either as inferior-superior or good-bad. The employer who belongs to the dominant class and race symbolizes the good woman, which retains characteristics necessary for the maintenance of the patriarchal order: chastity, virginity and purity. On the other hand, women domestic workers are deemed inferior because of their class and racial status:

She becomes the other, the bad woman, the embodiment of a corrupted, inferior, unusable sex: immoral, without virtue, loose. She is common property, sexually available to any man that comes along. A woman (women) thus devalued may not lay claim to the rights and protections the society affords to the woman who does have sociopolitical and sexual value [...] the woman so demeaned, so objectified, could be raped, beaten, worked like a beast of burden, or otherwise abused with impunity. (27-28)

At times, employers’ actions and words resonated with what Castañeda points out. Valentina recalled the words of the señora after her son had raped Valentina’s 14-year-old friend: “The señora said we could not do anything because we were *nadie*” — nobodies. As the women attempted to explain their experiences of sexual harassment, or of other women they knew, while working in domestic service most of them argued that employers’ class and racial status allowed them to be disrespectful in more than one way. Valentina explained, “I think that [they harass the workers] because they have money and

[the authority] does not do anything to them, that is why they *hacen y deshacen* [do as they please].” Aurora summarized it in a single phrase, she said: “*Poderoso Caballero, es Don Dinero.*” The phrase suggests that those who have money also hold power in society. In other words, male employers make use of their social and class status – which deems them as respectable gentlemen – by taking advantage of the power they hold to the detriment of vulnerable populations. In addition, because they have economic power they can also attempt to buy access to women’s bodies. Belén argued: “Maybe because they are the *patrones* and they have money [they think] well we can buy [women].” One of Esperanza’s friends actually encountered an employer that demanded sex as part of her duties at the job. She paraphrased what the employer said: “This is a job, you have to see this as a job.”

Women agreed that given their social status, employers were less likely to be held accountable by the justice system. On the contrary, as the women respondents shared, domestic workers could easily be accused of stealing as a way of silencing them. After Valentina’s sister completed her first week at a new job, the *señora* refused to pay her salary. When the employer was confronted by Valentina and her sister, the *señora* told them, “You can do whatever you want, I am going to say that you robbed me, that you did this, that you took this and lets see what you can do.” Other research has also suggested that this is a common tactic used by employers to avoid legal problems due to unfair job conditions, sexual harassment, or rape (Sillas Ramírez, 2004; Robles Romero, 1992, Grau, 1980). In fact, corruption and impunity was mentioned by almost all of the women in order to explain why they chose not to press charges. Most of the women

argued that accusing their employers was a waste of time and money because their patrones could afford to “buy” the judge in charge of their case. Interestingly, women said that in the case of rape they would press charges even if they had little possibilities of winning the legal battle. For the women I interviewed, forcing sexual intercourse against a woman was much more serious than receiving unwanted sexual attention in the form of a glance or an inappropriate touch and such act deserved to be punished.

Regardless of the ways in which women might be able to handle a situation of sexual harassment, most emphasized that they did not trust the police or the justice system. In fact, the Federal Law of Labor and the Mexican justice system does not provide adequate protection for women domestic workers. Although there is a special legislation that regulates this occupation – Chapter XIII, Article 331 of the Federal Law of Labor – the law is not enforced and employers do not abide to what is established there (Martinez Hernandez, 1998). The informality of the occupation, and in particular, the lack of proper legal protection make women much more vulnerable. Without exception, none of the women that I interviewed had signed a working contract and thus were working literally in some kind of legal limbo. In addition, sexual harassment laws protecting women who have paid employment in Mexico are very recent. The first effort to legislate about the issue took place in 1990 in Mexico City thanks to the insistence of women’s rights groups. At the time, a simple definition of sexual harassment definition and a minor sanction were added to the Penal Code. Although some Mexican companies have implemented policies for preventing and sanctioning sexual harassment, most employers have ignored the issue (Villalobos 2004). Currently, sexual harassment is

defined and prohibited via the Federal Penal Code. However, only 17 Mexican States, including Nuevo León, out of a total of 32 have local legislation about the issue (Inmujeres 2004). These are important but insufficient efforts. Domestic workers are much more vulnerable given that they work behind closed doors and lack mechanisms of employer accountability.

Although women viewed themselves as lacking in economic and social status in order to file a formal complaint when they faced any sort of problem in their jobs, including sexual harassment, most of them made use of their social networks in order to protect themselves. In some cases, their family members or friends directly confronted the employer. When the son of her patrones raped Valentina's friend, and although they were threatened, Valentina and her family were not silenced. Other times women decided to deal with the situation looking for comfort and support within their families.

As women talked about their experiences and defined the concept of sexual harassment it became clear that the issue was entangled with feelings of fear and self-guilt. Although some pointed out that men should be held accountable for their actions, most of the women placed great responsibility on themselves or other women they knew whenever they were sexually harassed, assaulted, or raped.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT: "A WOMAN'S PROBLEM"

Most of the women had a hard time defining what sexual harassment meant. Margarita laughed as she elaborated her definition and Lucía took a long pause and went silent while she analyzed my question. For the most part women defined sexual

harassment from their own experiences. In fact, some women did not limit themselves to talking only about sexual harassment at work, most of them elaborated about other forms of sexual violence such as street harassment, sexual assault, incest, and rape.

Women survivors of sexual violence like Victoria and Aurora who were sexually assaulted and raped respectively by family members during childhood, tended to identify and understand their own experiences as sexual harassment. When I first asked them if they had heard about the concept “sexual harassment” they both elaborated about what had happened to them. As Victoria started to narrate how her uncle had attempted to rape her, she shared: “I know [sexual harassment] up close and personal.” For them sexual harassment encompassed other more extreme forms of sexual violence.

Most of the women described sexual harassment mainly as a *falta de respeto* or lack of respect towards women expressed through men’s words or actions. Esperanza and Margarita understood sexual harassment as men’s sexual advances that were not welcomed or as something that is forced upon women. Those who had a difficult time defining the concept found it easier to talk about the feelings of discomfort that arise when a woman is being sexually harassed. The women labeled sexual harassment as broad range of men’s actions, like a glance or touch, that made them uncomfortable, as well as more obvious forms of harassment like explicitly asking for sex in exchange for money, groping, flashing, and attempted rape. When women talked about rape they understood it as different and separate from sexual harassment. When Valentina talked about the rape of a friend of hers by the son of their employers, she actually said, “That was not sexual harassment, that was rape.”

Although defining sexual harassment proved difficult to define, the women did not find it hard to find examples of situations in which they or other women experienced. At times, while we explored the topic in detail some women recalled a past experience they had forgotten, or had not labeled it as sexual harassment at the time. Depending on the context and the ways in which women interpret a particular event or interaction, a glance or a touch may or may not be labeled as sexual harassment. Research about sexual harassment has found that in some cases women fail to identify their experiences as sexual harassment because they may not be aware of it a crime, or because some might find it pleasurable (Giuffre & Williams, 1994). In addition, according to Giuffre & Williams, women's difficulty to "label" an act of sexual violence as such is responsible in part for women's silence. Rosario, whose story is not included here, narrated that while she worked at a maquila some of the women engaged in sexual talk and play with their male co-workers. Although she labeled those interactions as sexual harassment she also recognized that the women that participated seemed to enjoy it and were not offended.

Identifying sexual harassment is without a doubt a subjective and ambiguous process. Nonetheless it seemed that women were more likely to label an event as sexual harassment when the harasser occupied a more powerful position when compared to the victim or in the extent that it resembled the traditional quid pro quo notion of sexual harassment. When Lucía's supervisor at a maquila hinted that she had to have sex with him in order to keep her job, she immediately labeled her experience as sexual harassment.

When Margarita worked as a nurse at one of the hospitals a male co-worker constantly pursued her romantically. I asked if he had sexually harassed her, but she immediately denied it and said her co-worker meant well and probably wanted to initiate a serious relationship with her. In this case, because Margarita viewed his co-worker as an equal and potential partner she did not interpret his actions and words as harassment. On the other hand, when women talked about situations of harassment while they worked in domestic service it seemed very clear to them that their employers' intentions were not good. This illustrates research findings by Giuffre & Williams (1994) in their study with people working in the restaurant industry in Austin, "If the victim perceives the harasser as expressing a potentially reciprocal relationship interest, they may be less likely to label their experience sexual harassment" (392).

Further, as the women continued to talk about occurrences of sexual harassment, victim blaming and gender inequality surfaced in all of their stories. Women who experienced sexual harassment in their jobs were blamed for provoking men; some even blamed themselves. Interestingly, women also blamed other women for failing to label an event or interaction as sexual harassment. Women-who-blame-other-women for their experiences of sexual violence illustrates González-López's (2005) examination of "internalized sexism." Internalized racism refers to the ways in which women internalize and reproduce beliefs and practices that oppress them collectively as women; women use these self-oppressive beliefs and practices in their interactions with other women. For the most part perpetrators were protected and their actions were justified or excused.

When her supervisor sexually harassed Lucía, the licenciado who was in charge of the maquila's staff told her that she was *la chiflada*, the one who provoked him. Lucía's sister and Valentina's friend, who were sexually assaulted and raped respectively, were also blamed for what happened to them. Lucía's sister who was sexually assaulted by the son of her employer while she worked in domestic service was labeled as "vulgar" and "ofrecida" by the señora and her own mother. When Valentina's 14-year-old friend became pregnant after the son of the employers raped her, her family did not support her. Similarly to what happened to Lucía's sister, the señora accused Valentina of being a liar, questioning her moral integrity. The señora suggested that Valentina was not a virgin, that she probably engaged in sexual intercourse with someone else and was accusing her son to get money out of him.

In order to explain why their female co-workers at the maquila did not identify sexual talk and play with the men as sexual harassment, Rosario suggested the women had "cascos ligeros." This phrase, which indicates a double moral standard applied to women, is usually used in México to talk about women who are deemed promiscuous, sexually available, and easy. Similarly, Margarita held one of her friends responsible for being sexually harassed by her boss while she worked as office assistant. She repeated a phrase commonly used in México, "*los hombres llegan hasta donde las mujeres quieren*" or men will go as far as women allow them to. Based on her research with Mexican populations, González-López (2005) has also explored the meaning of this popular saying in Mexican society: On the one hand, people use this *refrán* to argue that women are always in control whenever they interact with men; women have enough power to defend

themselves and stop any unwanted sexual advance. On the other hand, it is also used to hold women accountable for unwanted pregnancies and for eliciting sexual attention from men.

Although some of my participants argued that sexual harassment is still prevalent due to a so called “culture of machismo” or because men have not been taught to respect women, very few mentioned men as part of the equation for ending sexual harassment. Most of the participants argued that women, not men, could prevent sexual harassment. Consequently, solutions focused on women choice of dress (i.e. avoiding low cut blouses or revealing clothing), their way of handling a situation of harassment (i.e. leaving the area or distancing themselves from the harasser), being alert and careful around men, among others. Interestingly, Lucía and Belén emphasized that women have – or should have – the sensibility of perceiving men’s intentions. A couple of participants also mentioned that being married or having a partner also represented a means of protection against harassment.

Overall, women made themselves responsible for preventing sexual harassment and sexual violence in general. The women’s stories of victim blaming as well as the solutions they posed to prevent sexual harassment indicate to what extent gender inequality and double standards are still present in Mexican society. Although participants identified that men were at fault and showed inappropriate behaviors, they simultaneously placed responsibility on women and thus normalized men’s actions freeing them from any responsibility when it comes to this form of sexual violence. It is

important to mention that only in situations of incest, participants did not blame the victim but instead placed all the responsibility on the perpetrator.

The women's views and the stories they told are consistent with what Nicola Gavey (2005) calls the 'male sexual drive discourse.' According to this social discourse shaping views of gender relations in patriarchal societies, male sexuality is active, while women appear as passive objects of men's sexual desires. Within this logic men harass women because they cannot help it. Men are viewed as naturally sexual and aggressive and as such, they cannot help their sexual urges. Thus, while men pursue women, they are the ones responsible of accepting or rejecting men's sexual advances. Similarly, Margarita argued that women are the ones that grant or deny men's sexual advances. How far a man will go is a woman's responsibility. This also explains why participants blamed themselves or other women for "provoking" men to sexually harass them. According to the male sexual drive discourse "men are always-already ready for sex, and it is women (or women's bodies, or pictures of women's bodies!) who activate this interest" (Gavey 2005, 104).

In México, this paradigm goes hand in hand with a collective cultural construction of men as "unchangeable." The U.S. paradigm of "Boys will be boys" and its Mexican equivalent "Así son los hombres" (that's the way men are) resonated in most of the interviews. Very few participants mentioned anti-sexist education as a means of stopping sexual violence against women. Some women argued that fathers are responsible for perpetuating machismo and sexist behaviors through their actions, which young boys later imitate. Although women identified this behavior modeling as a vicious cycle, they

did not mention how or if it was possible to put an end to it. One of the women who self identified as Christian said that only through Christ and his teachings men could find the path to righteousness.

Conclusion

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Although the objective of my research was to learn about sexual harassment in the occupation of household work, I also ended up confronting and questioning my own culture and learning about myself. I learned very important lessons on different levels: as a scholar in women's and gender studies, as a Mexican woman, and above all as a human being.

As I started working on my research and immersed myself in the field I realized that my participants thought I was the expert on the topic. They admired the work that I was doing and congratulated me for my professional credentials. They called me *licenciada* and pointed out that if something could change in this occupation it would be due to research like the one I was conducting. I felt humbled and honored for being able to get to know their side of the story, and committed myself to telling their stories by privileging their voices. As a novice researcher, I was nervous. Nevertheless, I felt safe and confident thanks to what I had learned from professors and other students at UT Austin. But as I started listening to what the women had to say (about life, work, sexual violence, motherhood, etc.) everything that I thought I knew crumbled into pieces.

Without a doubt, the stories that women shared with me opened up my eyes to a reality I thought I understood, but that I had never experienced before at a personal and intimate level. As I continued to listen to my participants' stories it dawned on me that I knew very little about the things they experience on a daily basis, both at home and at

work. Although I had been reading qualitative research about this research topic and knew about the precarious working conditions, at times, it hurt to listen to my participants' stories. I got to see the Mexican reality in flesh and blood: most of them struggle to earn a living, they do not have access to education or proper housing, they tolerate inhumane working conditions, and some have survived domestic and/or sexual violence. Some of my informants' experience of childbirth and motherhood – which are supposed to be life events of paramount relevance in a woman's life – were characterized by anguish and pain. Overall, the life stories of my informants say a lot about the precarious living conditions most Mexican people endure. According to the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social* (Coneval)⁴, 52 million of Mexicans live in poverty (El Economista, 2012) — which are the same or worst living conditions of the women that I interviewed. While one of my informants was sharing her story with me, she broke into tears and so did I. I found myself experiencing a range of feelings: admiration and gratitude towards my participants; anguish, pain, and anger because of the abuses they face at work and in their daily lives; and at times guilt.

As an upper class, blanqui/mestiza Mexican woman I recognized myself as an outsider and was forced to confront my class privileges. In a sense, I felt implicated. I could not deny it; I belonged to that same upper class that denigrates and humiliates women household workers. That same upper class does not offer proper working benefits and is responsible, in part, for the poverty and misery in which many Mexican people live in.

⁴ My English translation: National Council for the Evaluation of Public Policy on Social Development

It is a tough thing to admit, but it is true: the upper middle, privileged social classes have turned a deaf ear and have continued to ignore those who are in need. When I asked my participants why they had decided to participate in the study, one of them said, “because no one will listen to us, but through your work we can be heard.” One of the women who did not have the opportunity to complete the interview, talked for almost three hours only about her work experiences. Maybe sisterhood can be powerful after all, if we make ourselves aware and stop living in denial by hiding beneath our privileges.

Alongside those painful moments, there were other times in which I bonded with the women. We laughed together and talked about their positive work experiences, and those aspects of household work they find fulfilling like cooking, caring for children, and economic independence. They also shared beautiful stories about their families and others in regards to how they have coped with difficult events they have encountered in life.

On a very personal level, my informants’ stories taught me about courage and facing life’s difficult challenges; I believe each story is an exemplary experience of humanity. This was especially true for me after the kidnapping of my boyfriend. The decision of moving to Playa del Carmen as a way to cope and having my laptop stolen were also very hard. In the midst of all that happened and while I struggled to recover emotionally, working on this project was at once painful and frustrating. On several occasions I thought about giving up. Nevertheless, as I listened to the transcripts, I found strength and inspiration to keep on going.

For a long time, I felt that finishing up this project was linked to my boyfriend’s kidnapping, and maybe it is. He was there for me when I applied to graduate schools and

supported me emotionally when I decided to move away from home for the first time to pursue a master's degree. We were together for seven years. I believe that unconsciously, I did not want to finish this project until he was found. In other words, graduating and finishing my research meant that I had also found closure for his tragic fate. Today, I might not be able to say that I have found peace in my heart, but I am close to finding it. Like my participants' life stories, my experience while writing this MA thesis is also bittersweet and maybe that is how life is supposed to unfold.

Professionally speaking, at this point I still have to figure out what I want to do next. In the coming future, I want to go back to Monterrey and share my research with the professionals at Viccali, A.C. and other hardworking and inspirational people working at this supportive organization. I hope my research can be helpful in order to understand sexual harassment in the domestic service industry in my country. Nevertheless, I am coming to the end of this project with even more questions. Sexual harassment is a very complex issue that I hope to continue to examine in the future.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings in this qualitative study are not generalizable to the experiences of women household workers in Monterrey or other Mexican states. However, my participants' stories do reiterate the findings of past research like working conditions and relationships among household workers and their patrones. On the one hand, similar to what Grau (1980), Gutiérrez (1993), Gutiérrez Leyva (2001), Mancilla Casalez (1998), and García García (2009) found in their studies, most of the women I interviewed

mentioned long working hours close to exploitation, lack of working benefits, as well as different forms of discrimination by their employers. On the other hand, there are important differences. Given that the research I looked at did not focus exclusively on sexual harassment, some mentioned such occurrences but did not provide an analysis or in depth descriptions about the issue (Arenal, et al, 1997). In addition, most investigations relied on quantitative methods, which did not privilege the voices of participants. This may have prevented them from voicing sensitive topics like sexual harassment (Goldsmith, 1998).

As an initial exploration of the topic, the objective of the interviews was to examine the women's understandings and perceptions about sexual harassment. Through these conversations my purpose was to identify the social and cultural factors that make household workers vulnerable to sexual harassment at their jobs. Their positionality as working class women who lack access to education and job opportunities make them vulnerable to exploitation. A class and race based analysis is helpful to explain the problem, as well as the conceptualization of women who do domestic labor. In addition, victim blaming and internalized sexism are other aspects of cultural discourse that minimize sexual harassment and prevents men from been held accountable.

Still, there is enough room for further research about household workers and sexual harassment in Mexico due to the limited amount current research on the topic. In response to what my informants told me, there is mention about how to put an end to sexual harassment which only involves women's decisions, for instance about their attire or behaviors around men. However, few mentioned how men could be involved to stop

sexual violence against women. Consequently, further qualitative studies should focus on masculinity and men's views about sexual harassment. The increasing presence of men's groups promoting gender inequality in the country, such as Los Forkados in Monterrey and Hombres por la Equidad AC in Mexico City, gives hope for change.

All of my participants also emphasized the urgent need for working benefits and non-governmental organizations that can protect their rights. In Mexico, a lot of valuable actions can be accomplished through NGOs and activism. In fact, household workers have been organizing through NGOs, especially in México City and Cuernavaca, such as: Colectivo Atabal, A.C., Red de Mujeres Empleadas del Hogar, A.C., Centro de Apoyo a la Trabajadora Doméstica, A.C., and Expresión Cultural Mixe Xaam. As I worked on this thesis, the *Slut Walk* that originated in Toronto, Canada in 2011 echoed in Mexico and other Latin American countries. *Slut Walk* became *La marcha de las putas* in the Spanish-speaking world and gained visibility in Mexico thanks to the work of women's groups and civil society organizations. *La marcha de las putas* has been organized in Mexico City and other locations including but not limited to Monterrey and Guadalajara. In this regard, future research should look at this kind of activism and the professionalization of the occupation and examine whether this lessens women worker's vulnerability to exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment.

Appendix

**Table 1
Study Participants**

	Place of Birth	Age upon arrival to NL	Age on the 1st job	Marital status	Children	Siblings	Education	Religion	Seguro Social	
Lucía	NL	45	N/A	15	M	3	8	SEC (7th grade)	CH	TH
Belén	SP	39	2	15	M	4*	5	PRI	CA	TH
Valentina	NL	38	N/A	13	M	3	6	PRI	CA	NONE
Esperanza	NL	50	N/A	11*	M	3*	11	SEC	CA	TS
Margarita	NL	27	N/A	12	M	2	3	AC	CA	TH
Rosario	NL	46	N/A	19	M	3	10	SEC	CA	MAQ
Victoria	NL	41	N/A	20	M	2	12	PRE + AC*	CA	MAQ + TH
Rosa	TS	43	12	16	M	3	11	PRE (1st semester)	EC	TH
Aurora	NL	50	N/A	7*, 14	M	3	15	SEC	CA	TH
Luisa	VZ	39	16	16	M	3	7	SEC	CA	TH
Teresa	NL	30	N/A	16	CO	3	12	PRI	CA	DS

Place of Birth Codes

NL	Nuevo León
VZ	Veracruz
TS	Tamaulipas
SP	San Luis Potosí

Age on 1st Job Codes

11* Started to work at the age of 11 with her father as street sellers.

7*, 14 At age 7 she starts helping out her mother in domestic service; at 14 she starts working de planta.

Marital Status Codes

M	Married
CO	Cohabiting

Children Codes

4* One of her children died upon birth

3* One of her children died at the age of 8 after a tragic accident

Education Codes

PRI	Primaria, equivalent to elementary school; grades 1-6
SE	Secundaria, equivalent to middle school; grades 7-9
PRE	Preparatoria, equivalent to high school
AC	Trade school training to become a certified nurse
AC*	Trade school training in computer science

Religion Codes

CH	Christian
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CA	Catholic
EC	Evangelical Christian

Seguro Social Codes

TH	Has had health insurance through her husband
TS	Has had health insurance through her son
MAQ	Has had health insurance through jobs at Maquiladoras
DS	Has had health insurance when working in domestic service

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