Sociologus, Volume 67, Issue 2, p. 151 – 170
Duncker & Humblot, Berlin

Gender and Belonging: The Political Engagement of Mexican Migrant Leaders in Chicago

By *Stephanie Schütze**

Abstract

The article explores differences in the motivation for political engagement in a transnational context according to gender. The underlying ethnographic research reveals that the majority of Chicago's Mexican migrant leaders – male and female – are simultaneously engaged in various political and civil society organisations; they are not only members of hometown associations and Mexican political parties, but also participate in nationwide US Latino organisations, immigrant organisations, human rights organisations and even in Mexican and US government institutions.

In the article the political trajectories of four Mexican migrant leaders from Chicago are presented in short biographical portraits. The biographical approach shows the difference in life experience that formed these male and female leaders. For the men the motivation to become politically engaged is rooted in the sentiment of belonging to and being recognised in a community of origin. Therefore, male migrant leaders are deeply involved in community politics in Mexico. The motivation of the female leaders presented here is different: for them the recognition in their community and country of origin is not as important as it is for the men. Their political motivation is based much more on the feeling of belonging to the migrant community in Chicago and on improving their living conditions in the United States. Their concerns are fair conditions in everyday life in the United States – in education, health care and at work, as well as in terms of immigration status or with respect to gender equality in migrant organisations.

Keywords: Transnational political spaces, Mexican migrant organisations, political leaders, gender roles, belonging

* Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stephanie Schütze, Freie Universität Berlin, Lateinamerika-Institut, Rüdesheimer Str. 54 – 56, 14197 Berlin · Email: st.schuetze@fu-berlin.de.

1. Introduction

> 'We still have a bit of machismo, no? It seems to me that we still have that. The truth is that women are also part of this support. We're the ones out front but the women know how much time we have to put into all this. And they allow us to do it, they support us. So, I think women are also very involved. Here women do a lot, because when we have a get-together in the club, that's where we see them all, cooking and supporting us behind the scenes, but really, they're supporting the same cause.' (José Manuel, Chicago, 23 July 2009)

This was the response of José Manuel, a member of the Club Francisco Villa in Chicago, when asked why there were so few women leaders in Mexican migrant organisations. In my broad ethnographic research, I examined the emergence of transnational political spaces in the city of Chicago and its surrounding areas as a stronghold of Mexican migrant organisations in the United States (Schütze 2016). I found that migrant leaders play a key role in the development of transnational communities and new political spaces between Mexican migrant groups in Chicago and their communities of origin. The majority of them are men, though recently female leadership has been growing in Mexican migrant organisations. Yet, generally, the public visibility and perception of – male and female – migrant leaders as political actors is a relatively new phenomenon. It was not until 2006, when they coordinated and carried out national protests for comprehensive immigration reform, that the involvement of a wide network of Mexican migrant organisations attracted the attention of the US public (Bada 2007). Ever since the first marches, Chicago has become a centre of Mexican migrant political activity in the United States (Flores-González and Pallares 2010).

Many of Chicago's Mexican migrant leaders first organised in hometown associations (*clubes*) of their communities of origin.[1] Originally, hometown associations were cultural and social organisations that preserved the cultural habits of the migrants (for example, their local fiestas) and maintained ties to their home communities; but recently they have become increasingly politicised (Bada, Boruchoff, Schütze 2013). In recent decades more and more Mexicans in Chicago have organised in *clubes* of their home communities and *federaciones* of their home states. In 2013, Chicago had more Mexican migrant organisations than any other US city, with the exception of Los Angeles: more than 270 *clubes*, 17 *federaciones* and the national umbrella organisation Confederation of Mexican Federations (CONFEMEX) (Bada, Boruchoff,

[1] Although the first club from the state of Zacatecas was founded as early as 1962 in California (Moctezuma 2003), empirical studies show that only 20 percent of today's existing Mexican *clubes* were established before 1990 (Bada 2014; Orozco 2003).

Schütze 2013, p. 22). The proliferation of Mexican organisations in the United States in the last twenty years indicates that migrants not only remain socially engaged with their communities of origin but also create new forms of political cross-border organisation.

There has been very little research on women's participation in Mexican migrant organisations. Yet previous research confirms that the leadership of Mexican organisations throughout the United States is male dominated (Goldring 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003, 2007; Zamudio Grave 2005; Bada 2014). As he demonstrates in the passage cited above, José Manuel is oriented towards traditional gender roles – men in the foreground and women in their supporting roles. Nevertheless, he emphasises the importance of female involvement in the work of the migrant organisations. Xóchitl Bada notes that although women's participation in leadership positions in hometown associations and federations is still rare, women actually carry out important work in Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations, and thereby play a vital role in the cohesion of clubs and federations (Bada 2007, p. 136). She points out that women support their husbands as members of hometown associations and organise spaces of conviviality. These social encounters foster necessary spaces for dialogue and deliberation that lead to the establishment of more formal activities as the organisation of community development projects (Zamudio Grave 2005).

In this article I argue that male domination in migrant organisations is based on gender differences in migration patterns. Until the 1980s, the migration of Mexicans to the United States was strongly dominated by male migration: the majority were young single men from lower-class rural backgrounds who migrated alone and without travel documents (Durand 2011). Yet since the 1990s gender roles have varied significantly: there are single young women who migrate alone, and there are spouses who emigrate together. In her study, Patricia Arias points out that female migration from Mexico to the United States has not only increased quantitatively since the 1990s, as Douglas Massey and Jorge Durand have shown (Arias 2009, p. 257; Durand and Massey 2003), but that women's conditions, objectives and reasons for migration have also changed qualitatively. Although migration still is a general phenomenon that involves both single and married women, increasingly women are migrating on their own, without regard to marital status. They use the migration networks to get away from their places of origin and start their own life agendas in their places of destination. Migration has enabled women to push their own agenda and find exit strategies for oppressive situations produced by rigid and persistent gender inequalities in their places of origin in Mexico (Arias 2009, pp. 27, 51, 257).

Although Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations are strongly dominated by male leaders, there also are female leaders. Contrary to José Manuel's assertion, these are women who never assumed the role of silent supporters of their husbands in Mexican migrant organisations. During my fieldwork between 2004 and 2012, I interviewed a total of 15 Mexican migrant leaders (11 men, 4 women), who constitute the core of the political leadership of Chicago's Mexican migrant community. All of the leaders I interviewed are first-generation migrants: they came to the United States as teenagers or young adults in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Yet the male leaders correspond to the 'traditional' gender pattern: they are from lower-class rural communities, migrated to the United States alone and crossed the border undocumented. The female leaders, in contrast, correspond to a more recent migration pattern: they migrated alone or together with their husbands. Also, they are from regional towns and lower-middle-class families. They first migrated with temporary visas, although later on they also had to struggle for their residency permit in the United States.

In this article the political trajectories of male and female Mexican migrant leaders from Chicago are presented in short biographical portraits in order to examine the gender-based differences in motivation for political engagement in a transnational context. Far from generalising their biographical trajectories as representative of the overall political participation of Mexican migrants in the Unites States, these are case studies that are representative within the leading group of Chicago-based Mexican migrant organisations. The male as well as the female leaders belong to a new class of Mexican migrant leaders, who have built up their political influence in the field of migrant organisations and describe themselves as 'community leaders'.[2] The leaders portrayed here were chosen because of their multifaceted transnational activities in different organisations and political arenas. In the course of my ethnographic research I discovered that the majority of Mexican migrant leaders are simultaneously engaged in various political and civil society organisations; they are not only members of hometown associations and Mexican political parties, but also participate in nationwide US Latino organisations, immigrant organisations, human rights organisations and even in Mexican and US government institutions.

The following two sections of the article trace the different life experiences of two male and two female leaders in order to explore their political motivations as well as to show the gender-specific differences

[2] With this self-understanding they distance themselves from 'professional' politicians who are accused of being indifferent to citizen demands after elections.

of their political trajectories. I found that the increasing political organisation of Mexican migrant groups in the United States is not a sign of their one-sided focus on Mexico. Instead, these processes go hand in hand with a transnationalisation of social and political action and the growing foundation of Mexican migrant organisations in the United States is motivated by a sense of belonging to the country of origin. Nevertheless, the motivation for political engagement might vary according to gender roles. Previous research about gender relations in the Mexican migrant community in the United States shows that the political engagement of Mexican migrant women is more connected to issues of their daily life in the host country than to their sense of belonging to a hometown (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003). Therefore, in the last section of this article I analyse and contrast the different notions of belonging and engagement of male and female Mexican migrant leaders.

2. Male Leaders: Respect, Recognition and Representation

This section presents the political trajectories of Artemio and Fabián. Both Chicago migrant leaders have managed to pursue political careers that began with their engagement in hometown associations and their multifaceted activities in the migrant community. Artemio is a founder and leading member of the federation of the state of Michoacán in Illinois. On the basis of this political success in Mexican migrant organisations he developed a political career in the United States: today, he is political director of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR). Fabián developed his political engagement as a leading member of the federation of the state of Guerrero in Chicago and has been involved in other Mexican civil society organisations in the city. In 2015 his political trajectory took him back to Guerrero, where he was appointed secretary of migrant and international affairs.

2.1 Artemio: From the Juventudes Cristianas in Michoacán to Obama's Campaign Leader in Chicago

Artemio was born in the municipality of Acuitzio, where he attended elementary school. He finished high school in Morelia, the nearby capital of Michoacán, and began studies at a technical college. However, he had to give up his studies when his father migrated to the United States for a longer period of time; as the eldest son responsibility for the care of the family of six children fell to him. Artemio had already been politically involved in his youth in Michoacán: in the Juventudes Cristianas, a Catholic youth organisation, and in the youth wing of the Par-

tido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI),[3] the leading political party in Mexico.

In 1989 at the age of 24 he decided to migrate to Chicago, where he received support from his family network. An uncle who was already living in the city took him in. Upon arriving in Chicago, Artemio first worked in a plastics factory and participated in the labour union. Later he became a janitor in the public schools of Oak Park, a community in Cook County adjacent to Chicago, and fought for the labour rights of Mexican migrants. At the same time he started to participate in a club for migrants from the state of Guerrero, as there were no Michoacano clubs in Chicago in the early 1990s. In light of these experiences, Artemio, along with family members and friends, founded the Club Acuitzio in the 1990s, which then became one of the founding members of the federation of the state of Michoacán, FEDECMI, in 1998. From the beginning Artemio's interest in founding FEDECMI was to increase political leverage and negotiate with Mexican governments for financial support of community projects. The FEDECMI network helped him to carry out projects within the framework of the Mexican government's Program 3x1 in his community.[4] Yet Artemio has managed to expand his political capital and influence events far beyond his community: As a leading member of FEDECMI he has developed contacts that extend into Michoacán state politics. When it comes to carrying out projects, he uses his political relationships:

> 'I arranged the reconstruction of the road from Acuitzio to Canoas for them through my contacts and my congressmen friends. I arranged the financial support; the municipality didn't have to do anything. So, when I'm able to do certain things, I move ahead on my own. But sometimes I could do more and I don't, because every one of those things also requires commitments in return. I have to spend money, time and effort.' (Artemio, Chicago, 25 March 2005)

Because of his contacts with state government officials of Michoacán, Artemio was able to organise support projects in his community. However, he points to the high personal costs of the negotiation process, because each favour is connected to obligations and reciprocal favours.

---

[3] The PRI-party has ruled in Mexico since 1929, with the exception of two presidential administrations (2000–2012), and has shaped the nation's authoritative political regime.

[4] The 3x1 Program includes infrastructure projects (e.g., reconstruction of public plazas and paving of streets), social projects (e.g., student scholarships) and productive projects (e.g., support of small enterprises). The migrants initiate the projects and then negotiate with Mexican authorities to assure that according to the scheme dictated by the program, the municipal, state and federal government agencies each finance the same amount as the migrant hometown association.

In order to expand his political position and participate openly in the political arena, Artemio joined the PRI in Chicago and founded the group Vanguardia Migrante. His interest in the party is connected to his involvement in the federation, as he describes:

> 'Then within the same federation there have been more issues that have politicised us. We must get more involved. We're talking about negotiating with governments. Governments are parties, they're politicians. They pay more attention to you when you're from a party. And it doesn't matter if you're from the opposition party. But they think that maybe you have power, you have strength, you have a voice.' (Artemio, Chicago, 25 March 2005)

The political capital that Artemio acquired through his work in the federation opened doors to US political circles. Today Artemio is the political director of the civic organisation ICIRR, which represents a broad community of migrants from all over the world. So his political agenda is now directed at the vindication of migrant rights in the United States. Prior to this important new position, he was one of the main organisers of mass demonstrations for comprehensive immigration legislation in Chicago and California in 2006. After that he worked as a spokesperson for the Latino press in Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Artemio sees his career as a logical political development:

> 'This has been slow, but very noticeable, very significant process, because first I focused more on creating a structure of clubs and federations with an agenda for Mexico. Now the same people are still on my agenda, but the focus is on the United States, and that doesn't mean that I forget things back there. But now the priority is here, the priority is immigration reform; the priority is to acquire power so our people live better here.' (Artemio, Chicago, 10 July 2009)

Artemio's political success on both sides of the border is closely interconnected. From the beginning his activities have been related to political arenas in Mexico and the United States. His success is derived from the reciprocal application of knowledge and influence acquired in both political arenas: since his political contacts extend to the state level in Michoacán, he uses this position to apply for community projects. His position as a leading member of FEDECMI and as a successful organiser of community projects later helped him to expand his influence in the US political arena. From his trade union activities in the United States he learned to negotiate with various political and economic interest groups, which has been very helpful for negotiations within the 3x1 Program. However, Artemio still sees himself as a community leader because ICIRR is a civic organisation and he has not held office with either a US political party or government institution. For Artemio, his election to the presidency of FEDECMI in 2016 reinforces this view of himself as essentially a community leader.

2.2 Fabián: Community Leader in Chicago and Member of the Mexican PRI

Fabián is from Xonacatla, a community in the municipality of Cocula located in North western Guerrero, near the Michoacán border. The municipality has the highest migration rate in Guerrero because of its extreme poverty. Fabián came to Chicago in 1970 at the age of fourteen with a student visa and first lived with an uncle. As he had to work to pay for his stay, he soon had to give up school, but received an informal education through various non-profit organisations and became a successful real estate broker in Chicago. Yet Fabián did not become involved in politics until the 1980s. The main issues that motivated him to participate were the socio-economic conditions of his community, particularly poor access to education and health care. About his political trajectory and his identity as a leader he says:

> 'Actually, I feel more like a leader and even a community activist than a politician. Politics comes from necessity. We began to organise and do community work because the needs are so great. When I was living in my village, I got to see how people were dying because they didn't have access to proper transportation [...]. Health and education are basic.' (Fabián, Chicago, 22 June 2009)

Fabián sees himself as a community leader. To organise support for local infrastructure, he began to gather members of his community in Chicago in the early 1980s. His club was the first in the city to seek funding from the Guerrero state government through the 2x1 Program, the predecessor of the 3x1 Program (Bada 2014). Although he does not see himself as a politician, he became a member of the PRI in the United States:

> 'When I came here to the United States and started to wake up and pay attention to politics, I hated the PRI party. Well, what I felt about the PRI was because of the slaughter that had happened in Mexico with the students and for the absurd things that I saw, how they had handled politics in Mexico […] But as one evolves, you become aware of things. And I reasoned that if you want to fix things you can't run away, you have to get involved. It's like entering a rodeo. If you really want to be in the game and if you want to know what bullfighting is, you have to get in the ring and see and try your luck with the animal and not be in the stands screaming or throwing stones into the ring. So, this is how I envision participation in the PRI party today. And I am in favour of the PRI party, a member of the party in my state, affiliated with the party on the national level.' (Fabián, Chicago, 22 June 2009)

For Fabián participation in the party was the only way to influence politics in Mexico, although he rejected the PRI and its political system. For many years, he was engaged in several other political and civic are-

nas in Chicago in addition to his commitment to his community of origin and membership in the PRI:

> 'The first thing, the basis of everything else, is the club of my community; in no way will I abandon this [...] I'm also highly committed to the federation of Guerrero because it's my state. And after that comes the Confederation of Federations, the core of the Mexicans. And then a group of us from there became members of the Coalition for Immigrant and Refugees, whose board I'm on. Then the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities is another organisation where we do similar work.' (Fabián, Chicago, 22 June 2009)

Fabián describes how he built up political relationships and became more and more involved in political activism: his first priority was to support his community of origin. This motivated him to work in the federation of the state of Guerrero, which he helped to establish in 1995. Later Fabián also became a leading member of the umbrella organisation CONFEMEX. However, Fabián's political activism is not limited to Mexican migrant organisations: he is a member of the civic organisations ICIRR and of the "National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities" (NALACC), which fight for the rights of immigrants from many countries. Fabián has been involved in the struggle for Mexican migrants' rights, as shown by his participation in a demonstration in April 2010, shortly after the passage of a controversial Arizona law that criminalised undocumented migrants:[5]

> 'Chanting "Illinois is not Arizona", local activists escalated their push for immigration reform […] After briefly blocking a departing van, two dozen protesters were arrested on disorderly conduct charges as part of a movement energised by Arizona's passage last week of the nation's toughest law against illegal immigrants. The law allows police to single out suspected immigrants and demand proof of legal residence. The new law – which critics say will lead to racial profiling but proponents defend as a matter of security – has sparked a revival of the immigration debate. […] In Chicago, thousands of demonstrators are expected to participate in a pro-reform march through the Loop. "We have to escalate to another level because they have forced us," said Fabian Morales, one of those arrested and a principal organiser of Saturday's march. "We've tried to do this peacefully and have not been given a peaceful solution. We have to look for another level".' (Olivo, 27 April 2010)

After having become a well-known migrant leader in the United States, struggling in both political arenas, his home community and the

[5] The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (SB 1070) was enacted by the state of Arizona and signed into law by the governor in 2010. The US Department of Justice attempted to block its implementation. In June 2012, the US Supreme Court ruled on the case, upholding the provision requiring immigration status checks during law enforcement stops but striking down three other provisions as violations of the US Constitution.

migrant community in Chicago, Fabián built a political career in Mexico on this symbolic and political capital. In 2015 he was named secretary of migrant and international affairs in his home state of Guerrero, which is governed by the PRI.

3. Female Leaders and Their Commitment to Improving Living Conditions

The following section presents two female leaders who have had exceptional political trajectories in Chicago's Mexican migrant community. In 2006 Maria received the Special Leadership Award to Outstanding Female Leaders of the Chicagoland Area from the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County for her commitment to Chicago's public school system. She was the only Latina who received an award at this event; the other prizes were awarded to African Americans. Through her employment in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and her leading role in the Mexican migrant community she has managed to link very different organisations and fields of activity. That same year the newspaper *Redeye*, the youth edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, named her to Chicago's Top 40, an award for civic engagement in recognition of her leading role in organizing the 2006 marches for comprehensive immigration reform. Claudia developed her political trajectory in the federation of the state of Durango. In terms of female leadership Durango Unido stands out among the Mexican federations in Chicago as the only federation with a long tradition of female leadership.

3.1 María: Connecting the Mexican and the African-American Community

María was born in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, the youngest of seven children. She attended middle school, was trained as an accountant and graduated from high school in the city of Saltillo. Later she lived with her parents for a short time in southern Mexico. There she met her husband, who came from Zamora, Michoacán. After the wedding they moved to Zamora, where they spent the early years of their marriage. She had five children, but one daughter died, which led to a crisis in their lives. In 1975, when they were also having economic problems, the family immigrated to Chicago. In Mexico María had helped her husband manage several family businesses. In Chicago she first worked as a sales assistant in the department store Marshall Fields, then as an office worker in an investment company. Today she owns a pizza restaurant in Chicago's Chinatown and works as contact person

for the Latin American Consuls/Community Organisations/Resources Office of Language and Cultural Education at CPS.

María explains that she owes her development as a community leader to her dominant character. As a child she had been a typical 'tomboy'. She was brought up with the idea that women can do everything that men can do:

> 'I spent a lot of time with my brothers and grew up as a classic tomboy. So, I never felt that because I'm a woman I couldn't do certain things. On the contrary, I always accepted challenges, like: "Let's bike to the cemetery for a funeral wreath" because that was a sign of manhood. And when you're a child you don't distinguish between what it means to be male and what it means to be female. And in any case, it was a challenge. And just like everyone else, I would bring a wreath from a dead person to show that I had gone and that I wasn't afraid.' (María, Chicago, 24 March 2006)

María comes from a middle-class family in a Mexican provincial town: her parents and her husband were businessmen. In Zamora she had domestic servants and drove her own car. When she talks about her arrival in Chicago, María makes it clear that she was different from the majority of Mexican migrant women: 'Here in Chicago I saw that I was too independent, that I did not follow what they call the prototype of the suffering, selfless Mexican woman' (María, Chicago, 24 March 2006).

María's story differs from those of the male leaders, since the initial motive for her political activism in civil society organisations was not to support a community of origin. Although she works mainly in US civic organisations, she is known within the Mexican migrant organisations and is a member of the group Amigos del PRI. Party membership allows her to be present in Mexican political arenas, and she was the only leader from Chicago's migrant community elected to the PRI's National Assembly, the Consejo Político Nacional. Nevertheless, initially neither regional origin nor party politics motivated her to become politically involved:

> 'In the crucial years, when the children were growing up, I found that the education here wasn't like mine. I found that I had to pay attention to what was going on. That's when Bennett, who was the secretary of education, said that the Chicago school system was the worst in the nation. And then the school reform started [...] That's when I became a community representative.' (María, Chicago, 24 March 2006)

From the beginning the main reason for María's political activities was the everyday situation of migrants in Chicago. She first became politically involved in a parents' initiative at her children's school and then participated in school reform, after the Republican US Secretary

of Education William Bennett proclaimed the Chicago school system the worst in the nation.[6] María was engaged in this school reform movement in the late 1980s. The most important outcome with respect to migrant participation was the establishment of Local School Councils (LSC), which are elected by members of the school community and consist of parents, community members and school staff. They are empowered to select principals, develop school programs and spend discretionary funds (Fung 2006).

Today María is absorbed in a broad range of activities: she is a leading member of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest Latino civic organisation in the United States, established in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas. The organisation fights for better educational and employment opportunities for the Latino population (LULAC 2017). She also became involved in the Rainbow PUSH Coalition (RPC), a civic organisation with headquarters in Chicago that campaigns for social justice.[7] Today the RPC fights to improve the educational opportunities of marginalized groups (Rainbow PUSH 2017). María was director and founder of the Latino chapter within the RPC:

> 'I was already a member of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and signed up my daughters and my granddaughters as soon as they were born. Right now we presume that they are the youngest dues-paying members of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. About a year ago I told the Reverend that he had to create a Latino chapter, because it's not a war of us against them. I simply told him: "You have been led to believe that I have a piece of the pie that belongs to you; that I'm stealing from you, and vice versa. Instead, together – because here it's the votes that count – we can achieve better schools, better things".' (María, Chicago, 24 March 2006)

María is the only Mexican migrant leader I interviewed during my research who has a connection to African American leaders and organisations (Bada and Cárdenas 2009).[8] Around the issue of education,

[6] Secretary Bennett's statement also had to do with the fact that he was critical of the administration of the first black mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington (1983–87). Nevertheless, CPS was in need of reform; at that time 43 percent of students dropped out of school (Banas and Byers 1987). Mayor Harold Washington suggested an educational reform, designed in collaboration with parents, community leaders and teachers. In 1988, the Illinois State Legislature approved the Chicago School Reform Act (Rury 2016).

[7] Rainbow PUSH Coalition, founded by the famous African American civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson, has its roots in the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the late 1960s. The Rainbow PUSH Coalition originally fought to improve the economic situation of the black community; later it began to put the social and political development of other disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities, on its agenda.

[8] Chicago's African American and Mexican neighbourhoods are adjacent; boundaries between the two groups are well known and their political move-

María could correlate the concerns of both groups, African Americans and Latinos. She managed to link very different organisations and fields of activity: her involvement in the RPC and LULAC, her leading role in the Mexican migrant community and her employment with CPS as the contact person for civic organisations and Latin American consulates.

3.2 Claudia: The Younger Generation of Female Leaders

Born in the city of Durango, Claudia is from an urban, lower-middle-class family that lived in several places in Mexico during her childhood. She came to Chicago at the age of seventeen in 1990. Although she travelled by plane with a tourist visa, she didn't have documents for residency in the United States and soon became an 'undocumented visa overstayer'. Claudia graduated with a degree in merchandising and marketing from Wilbur Wright College in 1997 and then obtained a bachelor's degree in Latino and Latin American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Later she had to temporarily interrupt her university studies because of her immigration status. However, in 2011 she was able to clear up her status because she was married to a US citizen and immediately resumed her university studies. For several years, she worked as program coordinator in the Latino Cultural Center of the University of Illinois at Chicago.[9] Afterwards she worked as the community engagement coordinator of the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. In September 2016, she was named executive director of the civic organisation Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN) and moved back to Chicago.

Thanks to her Aunt Marcia, Claudia has been involved with Durango Unido since childhood. There has been a tradition of female leadership in their family. Both women say that in Durango the women in their family have dominated for generations and participated in collective decision-making in their home community. The family has been part of the federation's leadership since its foundation: Marcia was the first

---

ments are usually separate from each other. In his study John J. Betancur points out that the main conflict between African Americans and Mexicans in Chicago is the distribution of resources, for example, the allocation of jobs (Betancur 2005, pp. 163 ff.). Nevertheless, Betancur emphasizes that there has been political cooperation between the movements, in particular during the administration of Mayor Harold Washington in the 1980s (Betancur 2005, pp. 163).

9 The Latino Cultural Center, which was founded in 1976, is committed to the representation of Latino cultures in the university and supports students of Latin American descent.

president of Durango Unido (1997–2002), followed by another aunt and then Claudia, who was president from 2010 to 2013. Initially Claudia participated in Durango Unido more because of familial obligation than from her own desire to volunteer. But over time she became increasingly interested in the work, and because she could handle computer work better than most of the older members of the federation, she helped write documents and took over more and more responsibilities. When she had to interrupt her studies due to her unsettled immigration status, the work with Durango Unido became a kind of substitute education, as she states:

> 'On the one hand, I felt the satisfaction that one feels helping their community. Being able to say you put in your little grain of sand to make change. And on the other hand, I saw that my immigration status wasn't getting resolved and was not going to be resolved in the short term and that obviously, I wasn't going to be able to continue my studies. I saw that by getting involved in the community I could meet people, could make connections, could learn, could have other experiences. So, I saw it as my university, as the option to learn.' (Claudia, Chicago 23 April 2009)

In Durango Unido she started 'from below' by helping out, then worked herself up in the office hierarchy (secretary, treasurer, spokeswoman) and finally became president of the federation. She talks about the difficulties she had as a young woman in the male-dominated environment of the Mexican migrant organisations in Chicago:

> 'It's been quite a challenge being young and being female. I say this because on several occasions in order to share my ideas, in order to influence decision-making within the federation, I had to use the strategy of having one of the gentlemen who was a little more open minded submit my ideas. Which doesn't seem right, but at the end of the day the important thing was that goals were met and things got done. [...] I recall very well a meeting where one of the gentlemen who had been president told me, "What do you know, being so young and a woman?" And I said, "What's that got to do with it?" I think in any group, in any space, it's always good to have new ideas from young people and for men and women to be able to work together. So, yes, it was difficult.' (Claudia, Chicago 23 April 2009)

Claudia describes how difficult it was at first for her to speak in the context of the federations, since it was not common for a young woman to intervene in discussions and decision-making. Yet, Claudia stresses that the role of women in Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations has changed a lot in recent times:

> 'It's been a process. I think the rest of my colleagues from other federations also recognize women's leadership like the kind we've had in Durango Unido. And that has been one of the main characteristics of the federation and I think we've been able to open the door for other federations where we've been an

example to other women. That they're not just there for fiestas or events where they have to make food or serve food. I think there is more capacity to be on the board and to make decisions and changes in these groups that will lead to changes in our communities. But it's a process, it takes time. I think after twelve years we still haven't got to the point where there are more women in the other federations, and that maybe it will take longer. But we must continue working to make that happen. Compared to meetings ten years ago, yes, there has been a change – and yes, I can see more women but there's still a lot of work to do. But also, it's up to women to find that space, you have to be prepared and fight for that space.' (Claudia, Chicago 23 April 2009)

Claudia describes the transformation of gender relations in Chicago's federations as a slow process. In Mexican migrant organisations women's roles are still limited to that of wife and mother. However, she points out that women have to take charge of their own empowerment. Claudia's own trajectory was difficult, but she managed to ascend step by step in the hierarchy of Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations. Today, she is a community leader with a broad range of activities: starting with the presidency of Durango Unido, she then became president of CONFEMEX (2011–13) and currently is president of the NALACC board of directors. During the 2006 mass mobilisation for immigration reform Claudia was one of the most important leaders. In fact, she is one of the few women, and the only young woman, who is part of the leadership network of Chicago's Mexican migrant community. Via the presidency of CONFEMEX she is connected to the leaders of Chicago's Mexican federations and through her leading role in NALACC she has political contacts throughout the United States.

4. Leadership and Gender Roles: Different Notions of Belonging and Engagement

The political trajectories of Chicago's Mexican migrant leaders are individually very different. However, there are striking similarities within the group of male leaders and contrasting similarities within the group of female leaders.

The male leaders are from poor families in rural Mexico. Despite that economic background, they had more education (middle school, high school, beginning of university studies) than most Mexican migrants in the United States. The starting point of their transnational activities in Chicago is the commitment to their community of origin. The sense of belonging to their communities and the social obligation to support their families in Mexico motivated them to organise, but this engagement is not without self-interest: instead the organisation of projects that support their communities of origin is connected to demands for

political influence as well as for respect and recognition. They assume the role of transnational brokers and negotiators *(gestores)* between their communities of origin and the clubs in Chicago, between the communities of origin and government authorities in Mexico as well as between the Mexican migrant community and the political environment in Chicago. Their mediating role and their political competence are based on complex social relationship networks: first they accumulate social and symbolic capital through successfully completed support projects in their communities of origin and through their support work for the local migrant community. Their social capital is built on support groups from members of their club, that is, from acquaintances, friends and relatives of their community of origin. Because of their special position in the transnational negotiation processes the leaders can then transform their social and symbolic capital into political capital. Meanwhile, building on their leading role in their clubs they then assume political leadership positions, such as Fabián did as president of CONFEMEX and Artemio as political director of ICIRR.

In contrast to the male leaders, the female leaders come from cities and towns; socioeconomically, their families would be considered lower-middle class. This gender difference may have to do with the fact that women from rural communities in Mexico have far less access to education and to the public sphere than men. Most female Mexican migrants come from rural communities and migrate to the United States in the context of family reunification, that is, they follow their husbands to Chicago and after they arrive assume the role of their husbands' supporters in migrant organisations. The female leaders I interviewed, however, did not migrate to follow their husbands; instead they either migrated together with them or alone. Their social advantage – higher education and professional autonomy – facilitated access to male-dominated leadership positions in Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations. However, they are not members of the Mexican elite – the upper middle class or upper class – who do not have problems entering, studying or working in the United States. Even if they did not have to travel on foot across the border without a visa, they had to deal with the same problems upon their arrival as the majority of undocumented Mexican migrants: difficulties with access to education and well-paid work. Moreover, the female leaders migrated to the United States because of various personal, social and economic emergencies.

The motivation of the female leaders of Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations to be politically involved is different from that of the male leaders: for the women, recognition in their community and country of origin is not as important. They first focused on improving living conditions of the Mexican migrant community in the United States.

Their political concerns have to do with fair conditions in everyday life in the United States – such as education, health care, employment, immigration status, or with respect to gender equality in migrant organisations. In her study of female Mexican migrants to the West Coast, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo has also found that their political participation is connected to issues of their daily life (legalisation of their immigration status, children's access to public education and so on) (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003). Although the female leaders portrayed in this study also work to improve living conditions in their country of origin, none of them have the same kind of close relationship to a rural community of origin that the male leaders have; nor do the women leaders have the same kind of personal translocal network of social relationships. Their commitment to their country of origin is at the state and national levels: María represents the concerns of migrants in national meetings of the PRI party; Claudia fights on behalf of the federations via Durango Unido at the state level and via CONFEMEX at the national level. One reason for this gender difference might be that migrant women suffer more from excessive economic demands and control over their personal freedom in the local community context than men do. When they leave their place of origin, women migrants also break away from those excessive demands and controls.

Recurring political issues for both female and male leaders are education and health. Some could not complete their school or university education in Mexico because they had to work, as for example Artemio. Others could not study or finish their studies in the United States because of their immigration status or their economic conditions, as happened to Fabián and Claudia. Thus, they fight for access to higher education for young people, for education in their communities of origin and for better educational opportunities for migrants in Chicago. Some of the female leaders – such as María – became politicised around the issue of their children's education. A second important issue is the lack of health care in Mexican communities of origin. Therefore, migrant organisations from Chicago support the construction of health centres, nursing homes, children's hospitals and similar institutions in their regions of origin.

5. Conclusion

This article explores gender-based differences in the motivation for political engagement in a transnational context. The underlying ethnographic research reveals that the majority of Chicago's Mexican migrant leaders – male and female – are simultaneously engaged in various political and civil society organisations; they are not only members

of hometown associations and Mexican political parties, but also participate in nationwide US Latino organisations, immigrant organisations, human rights organisations and even in Mexican and US government institutions. Apart from common recurring political issues – such as education and health care – the article shows that the development of political agency is biographically very different in men and women. It also highlights the fact that women's participation in Mexican migrant organisation in Chicago cannot be reduced to the reproductive work – such as cooking and helping out during political events. Instead that participation also produces strong female leadership. Following common patterns of social and educational backgrounds that differ from those of the male leaders, women have developed their own political agency and leadership positions within Chicago's Mexican migrant organisations.

References

Arias, Patricia. 2009. *Del Arraigo a la Diáspora*. Mexico-City: Porrúa.

Bada, Xóchitl. 2014. *Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicagoacán: From Local to Transnational Civic Engagement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

– 2007. The Binational Civic and Political Engagement of Mexican Migrant Hometown Associations and Federations in the United States. *Iberoamericana*, 7 (25), pp. 129–42.

Bada, Xóchitl, Boruchoff, Judith and Schütze, Stephanie. 2013. Transborder and Civic Engagement of Mexican Hometown Associations (special issue). *Latino Studies*, 11 (1), pp. 21–27.

Bada, Xóchitl and Cárdenas, Gilberto. 2009. Blacks, Latinos, and the Immigration Debate. Conflict and Cooperation in two Global Cities. In: J. Feagin et al., (eds.), *How the U.S. Racializes Latinos: White Hegemony and its Consequences*. Boulder: Paradigm Press. pp. 166–182.

Banas, Casey and Byers, Devonda. 1987. *Education Chief: City Schools Worst Mayor To Take 1st Step To Reform In Citizens` Meeting*. Chicago Tribune Online, November 8, under: <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-11-08/news/8703230953_1_dropout-rate-public-schools-mayor-harold-washington> (accessed 28 April 2016).

Betancur, John J. 2005. Framing the Discussion of African American-Latino Relations: A Review and Analysis. In: A. Dzidzienyo and S. Oboler, (eds.), *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*. New York: Palgrave Press. pp. 159–72.

Durand, Jorge. 2011. Ethnic Capital and Relay Migration: New and Old Migratory Patterns in Latin America. *Migraciones Internacionales,* 6 (1), pp. 61–96.

Durand, Jorge and Douglas S. Massey. 2003. *Clandestinos. Migración México-Estados Uni-dos en los albores del siglo XXI*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas and Miguel Ángel Porrúa.

Flores-González, Nilda and Amalia Pallares. 2010. *¡Marcha! Latino Chicago and the Immigrant Rights Movement*. Champaign/USA: University of Illinois Press.

Fung, Archon. 2006. *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy Archon Fung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Goldring, Luin. 2001. The Gender and Geography of Citizenship in Mexico-U.S. Transnational Spaces. *Identities,* 7, pp. 501–37.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierette. 2007. La incorporacion del genero a la migracion: no 'solo para feministas' y no solo en la familia. In: M. Ariza and A. Portes, (ed.), *El Pais Transnacional: Migracion mexicana y cambio social a traves de la frontera*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, pp. 423–452.

– 2003. *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

LULAC 2017. *League of United Latin American Citizens*, under: <http://lulac.org> (accessed 22 March 2017).

Moctezuma Longoria, Miguel. 2003. Territorialidad socio-cultural y Política de los clubes Zacatecanos en Estados Unidos. *Migración y Desarrollo*, 1, pp. 1–25.

Olivo, Antonio. 2010. *Civil Disobedience New Tactic in Immigration Reform Fight. With Eye on New Law in Arizona, Local Activists attempt to stop Deportation Van*. Chicago Tribune Online, April 27, under: <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-04-27/news/ct-met-illinois-immigration-anger2-20100427_1_illegal-immigrants-immigration-reform-immigration-debate> (accessed 8. April 2016).

Orozco, Manuel. 2003. Mexican Hometown Associations and their Development Opportunities. *Inter-American Dialogue Research Series. Remittances Projects,* pp. 1–15.

Rainbow PUSH. 2017. *Rainbow PUSH Coalition*, under: <http://rainbowpush.org> (accessed 22. March 2017).

Rury, John L. 2016. *Schools and Education*. Encyclopedia of Chicago, under: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1124.htm>l (accessed 30 April 2016).

Schütze, Stephanie. 2016. *Constructing transnational political spaces. The multifaceted political engagement of Mexican migrants between Chicago and Michoacán*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zamudio Grave, Patricia. 2005. ¿El señor o la señora? Gender and participation in Chicago's Mexican immigrant community. *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 98, pp. 184–203.