

MEXICAN WOMEN MAKE A LIFE, AND A LIVING, IN EL BARRIO



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Photo—Victor Matos

For Carmen Ayela, cooking and cleaning at home come second to ringing up purchases and chatting with the clientele at La Malinche Gift and Record Shop.

"In Mexico, many women don't work because men don't let them," Ayela said from behind the counter at the store where she works, on 110th Street and Lexington Avenue. "But here it's different."

Ayela, 43, belongs to a growing generation of Mexican women in New York City who left their small towns in Puebla and Guerrero to serve customers in New York *bodegas* and bakeries, helping to pay the bills and send money home to Mexico. They represent the changing role of Mexican women who come to the United States and become not just mothers and wives, but working women.

The percentage of working women in Mexico has been growing since the '70s. Still, even today, the employment rate for women in the United States is twice as high: In 2002, about 60 percent of women age 16 and over were employed or were looking for work. Mexican women attribute their low numbers in the working world to widespread employer dis-

crimination against women in Mexico, where many job postings ask job seekers' marital status and gender, and women can lose their jobs if they become pregnant.

Many Mexican men bring this cultural reference with them when they immigrate to the United States. When Ayela first joined her husband in New York nine years ago, he forbade her to work, out of "jealousy and machismo," she said. A recent study by the National Foundation for Women Business Owners on women entrepreneurs in Mexico found that "machismo" was an obstacle for 40 percent of businesswomen.

But a new life in the United States also means new challenges and a new way of interpreting social roles. When Ayela's husband found little money left over after paying the rent and bills and sending money for books to a college-age daughter in Mexico, he finally let her work. So for the past five years, Ayela has been the cashier and unofficial culinary and medicinal advisor at La Malinche.

Carmen Ayela prepares a basket of food for a customer at La Malinche in East Harlem.

"I like working because I earn my own money and can do whatever I want with it," she said, filling a plastic bag with garlic for a customer. For other patrons, she recommends ointments for hands and feet that are covered with blisters after tiring days of dishwashing or construction. While Ayela says her work is rewarding, she still has conflicting feelings about being away from family.

Back in Mexico, where women are in charge of most care-giving, Ayela worked part-time cleaning a lawyer's office that was near her home and still allowed her to spend most of her time caring for her three children. In New York, she was glad to find a quiet job close to her apartment, where her 16-year-old son can visit her after school.

"You have to abandon your kids to work all day, and you don't get to rest," she said. Working also keeps her from enrolling in classes to improve her English, she said, a sentiment echoed by several female Mexican customers who also work.

"When I get home from cleaning offices in New Jersey, all I want to do is eat and go to bed," said one customer in her early 30s.

Down the street at México Lindo Bakery on Lexington Avenue and 116th Street, María Nava, 30, takes pastry orders from customers because the accounting studies she completed in Puebla are of no use to her in her new life north of the border. "Here, my certificate doesn't mean anything," she said. "As long as I don't speak English, this is the best job I can get."

Long hours at the store followed by cooking and cleaning and childcare at night also allow her little time to study English. Five days a week, Nava dons a frilly flower apron and white plastic gloves to stack cream-filled pastries, sweet breads and cookies on metal baker's trays. Like Ayela, Nava often worries that she does not spend enough time with her child. Her husband works in construction, and together the two earn just enough money to pay the rent, bills and costs of babysitting—Nava must pay a friend to pick up her 4-year-old daughter and care for her after school.

"More than anything, the majority of people come to the United States to work and help their family in Mexico," she said. "I couldn't come to this country and do nothing."

At La Malinche, Ayela stacks dollar bills in a small black tray that serves as the store's makeshift cash register. Throughout the day, she watches *novelas*, gossips with clients, and portions out handfuls of products—*achiote* peppers into clear plastic bags, and juicy cactus leaves into black plastic sacks. Above her on the wall hangs a framed drawing of the store's namesake, La Malinche, Hernán Cortés' Indian translator, a woman who—like both Ramírez and Nava—crossed cultural boundaries in order to survive. **VNY**

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