



LAES has developed a series of immigrant issue instructional modules entitled "Tierra de Oportunidad" for orientation to our complex society.

INSTRUCTIONAL AREA: *Managing Family Life*

Tierra de Oportunidad - Module 11

Women's Changing Roles

Overview

For many married immigrant women from Mexico, coming to California represents not only a move to a community with an unfamiliar language, novel problems (e.g. transportation in spread-out cities, shopping in large warehouse outlets), separation from supportive family members, and friends, but, also new roles, as workers, mothers, and wives. These changes in roles and their implications for day-to-day life are so fundamental and far-reaching that "fashioning a new life" must be seen as a major personal and intellectual challenge.

Role changes create pressures in all families and the pressures confronted by immigrant women come from within the family -- in terms of women's relationships with their husbands, children, sisters, cousins, and other extended family members. But these pressures also come from United States society which, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly, forces new roles on immigrant women.

Migration and settlement patterns add to the pressures experienced by married women -- since usually a wife will join her husband only after a number of years of remaining in Mexico as her husband migrates back and forth. Typically, a husband, wife, and children will only be reunited as the husband begins to achieve a measure of job security. This transformation of family life means changes, worries. While this traditional pattern still prevails, it is increasingly common, particularly for families from urban areas to migrate together to the United States

One of the most difficult challenges facing women from rural areas is how to combine full-time work in the formal labor market (as distinguished from work in the "informal sector" in Mexico) with her role as a wife and mother.

The United States social services system, in responding to the feminization of poverty, confronts immigrant women with substantial challenges due to the "feminization of bureaucracy" -- as women come to assume the primary role as providers of information required for program eligibility determinations, as custodians of a wide range of documents and official notices, and interpreters of official notifications of positive or adverse actions by human service programs, and of requests for additional information.

Women who are on their own as heads of households with children face yet another spectrum of problems as they struggle to bear the burden of multiple full-time roles -- as wage-earners, child rearers, crisis-managers in finding and paying for housing and interacting with the support systems which seek to assure their involvement in their children's education, health care, and social life.

There are no easy solutions to the problems immigrant women face but adult education programs have the potential of providing a tremendously valuable service to the extent that they can provide women with problem-solving skills, opportunities for reflection, and

communication skills needed to embark on a new and broad range of personal, economic, and social interactions in "the invisible country" of United States communities.

Basic Skills Development

<i>Analysis and Problem-Solving Skills:</i>	Experience in identifying conflicting pressures, comparing and contrasting divergent sources of information, questioning and weighing of both traditional and contemporary values. Forging novel solutions to intensely personal dilemmas.
<i>Communication Skills:</i>	Understanding the purposes and context of communication with a range of bureaucracies, understanding the value of communicating questions, uncertainties, personal perspectives on problems, skills in defusing confrontational situations.
<i>Reference Skills:</i>	Using and evaluating the quality of information provided by diverse sources of information and the concept of comparing alternative interpretations of novel situations. Interpretation of information from mass media, print, specialized hotlines, as well as "outreach" services, "information and referral providers", and other community institutions.

Teaching Points

1. **Social life in the United States inevitably changes immigrant women's roles.** Women's lives, and the lives of their husbands and children, cannot go in isolation from the social context they live in. Personal values about "traditional" or "non-traditional" ways of living have to be examined, in the context of the pressure of United States life, ideally by spouses addressing issues jointly as they come up and weighing pros, cons, and implications of each family decision. Key decisions such as where to live, working at one job or another, and the desirability of sharing housing should be explored fully.
2. **Almost no families in the United States can survive without both husband and wife working,** without making new arrangements for child care and how the household is organized. There is no "right way" -- just ways that are right for one individual family or another. Gender roles and mores in the United States are different than in Mexico and will inevitably affect families' lives. Such changes cannot be avoided, but they can be managed.
3. **Tensions within the family are the inevitable results of learning to function in a new environment.** They are neither "good" nor "bad". What can be "bad" or "good" is how families confront these new challenges. In most cases, families will have to "experiment" with how best to resolve the conflicts they face -- e.g. women's need for independence as part of new work roles, bureaucracies' tendency to deal directly with women and ignore their husbands, children's exploration of new United States behavior and mores which decrease parents' authority.
4. **Tensions between wives and their husbands are the inevitable result of changed rules of the game for social and economic life as well as families reuniting after long periods of separation.** Family tensions and conflicts are probably inevitable among reuniting families. The best a husband and wife can expect is to be able to resolve those conflicts in a loving, mutually supportive, and creative way. Economic pressures, fears about change, children's performance in school, a constant stream of unexpected problems, bad treatment by employers, the police, storekeepers, all create stress for both husband and wife. The only defense against these pressures is to expect them and prepare for them.
5. **Children are agile learners of new modes of behavior but, nonetheless, need constant support from their parents' in understanding and adapting to a new society and educational system.** Children in immigrant families will be able to assimilate tremendous amounts of new information, adapt rapidly in many regards to their new environment, and embark rapidly on learning a new language. This rapid, surface-level adaption may, in many cases, belie these same children's need to have their parents help them understand and respond to the new social demands

they face. Parents should seek to overcome the social pressures which tend to isolate their children from them.

6. Life in the United States makes it difficult to rely on informal networks for support in addressing personal problems.

The informal networks which provide women and men advice and consultation with personal dilemmas, information about new and unfamiliar issues, and personal support and encouragement in traditional peasant societies are weak in the United States -- partly due to people's mobility and living in physically dispersed locations, partly due to the fact that more and more of our social interactions have become formalized.

7. In the United States many family support services which were provided in Mexico by informal networks of family, friends, and neighbors are provided by formalized institutions. Immigrants who do not live in areas near relatives or acquaintances from their home villages are cut off from the support networks which helped them in problem-solving and overcoming adversity in Mexico. There are now, however, a variety of formal structures -- health clinics, schools, legal services, child care providers, mutual support groups in many parts of California that can provide valuable support to families and to women who bear the brunt of much of the isolation. These networks will never be able to achieve the level of intimacy and individualized support which extended family networks provide but it will still be necessary and useful to rely on them. At the same time, persons needing help will have to recognize their limitations.

8. Personal, economic, and social adversity needs to be the basis for triggering mutual support as opposed to individual conflict. Most immigrants' experience includes a measure of injustices and instances of unfair, hostile, or indifferent treatment. It is important to avoid the common reaction of displacing the pain of these negative experiences into the home. Immigrants should be prepared to expect and understand a measure of unwarranted hostility, and to acknowledge and support family members as each encounters their own difficulties.

9. Women on their own can seek support from informal mutual assistance networks. Women on their own--as heads of households or simply as single women working in the United States may well be the most isolated group among the immigrant population. In some cities of California, advocacy groups are now forming which are able to provide help to women immigrants in facing the special problems they face. Women's mutual support groups provide particularly valuable assistance in finding access to many official services.

SAMPLE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss women's experience of the change from living in Mexico to living in the United States During their first month in the United States what most surprised women about the United States? What aspects of life in the United States continue to seem most strange, unusual or different? Have participants write a letter home to a sister or female relative telling them "what it's like".
2. Discuss the pros and cons of women and children remaining in Mexico while their husbands go to the United States to work in contrast to joining their husbands in the United States Explore whether differences of perspective relate to women's different villages or different family networks. If so, how?
3. Ask class members, men and women to prepare "daily schedules" on how they spend their time. Make pie chart graphs on the blackboard. Review the graph to analyze different individual patterns and discuss the differences between men's schedules of activities and women's.
4. Discuss the pros and cons of women working, remaining at home to take care of children, or combining both roles. Emphasize the appropriateness of different individual opinions and perspectives. Have class participants prepare a list of five examples of advice they would give other women about combining work and family life.
5. Have students list the five greatest surprises they had in discovering what life in the United States was like. Other options are: 1) list the five best things about life in the United States, 2) the five worst things, 3) the five most serious problems facing families. Discuss strategies for overcoming these problems.
6. Role play effective and ineffective approaches to dealing with family conflict scenarios -- e.g. children not being fed because both parents are working, a woman considering a better-paid job on the night shift, a husband having to give a wife a ride to work at 5 in the morning.

7. Role play effective and ineffective scenarios about helping children with their problems with school -- e.g. dealing with racial or ethnic insults, trying to help with homework when parents do not know English, meeting with a teacher who says a child is doing poorly in school, participating in after-school sports activities when parents do not have a car and public transportation may be dangerous.
8. Discuss whether a husband or wife should tell their spouse if they are insulted at work and, if so, how a spouse can best provide support in dealing with unfair treatment at work?
9. Discuss the pros and cons of saving money for a woman to have her own car to look for and commute to a better job than the one she has now.
10. Develop a generic family budget in pie graph form including categories for housing costs, the costs of working (including transportation and child care), food, health care, saving for emergencies, debt repayment. Why might budgets differ? What trade-off might there be between transportation costs for going to work and getting a better job?
11. Discuss what the most common problems class participants see in sharing housing with family or friends and what are the best strategies for minimizing conflict.

RESOURCES

The list of materials relevant to women's legal issues is too extensive to include here. Important resources in California are:

- In Northern California, **Mujeres Unidas y Activas**, Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services, (415) 243-8215 is an effective grass-roots women's group addressing a wide range of women's issues.
- In Southern California, **CHIRLA** maintains a Materials Clearing House and a Speakers' Bureau which can be reached at (213) 736-1300 Extension 631.
- **CHIRLA** also has a Sub-Committee focusing on Issues relating to Domestic Workers. The contact person is: Nancy Cervantes who can be reached at (213) 385-2977.
- An excellent overview is provided in Chris Hoagland and Karen Rosen, editors. **Dreams Lost, Dreams Found: Undocumented Women in the Land of Opportunity**, CIRRS, 1991, \$20. This 150 page report is a valuable resource providing teachers an in-depth look at the issues faced by undocumented women.

ESL Commercial Textbooks

- Consider the Issues, Longman
Unit 7, What's Happening to the American Family?
Unit 8, Women Caught in the Middle of Two Generations
Book and Audiotape
- Decision Dramas, JAG Publications
Unit 10, Divorce or Stay Married?
Unit 12, Date an American or Not?
Unit 13, Who Will Take Care of the Baby?
- ESL for Action, Addison-Wesley
Unit 7, Moving Toward Equality
- Face the Issues, Longman
Unit 2, Living Through Divorce
Unit 4, Where the Girls and Boys Are
Unit 8, From One World to Another

- Faces: Exchanging Views in English, Lateral Communications
Unit 14, Men and Women
 - Faces of the USA, Longman
Chapter 1, The American People: Men and Women
 - Heartworks, Inspirations for English as a Second Language, Prentice Hall Regents
Unit 10, Are Men and Women Really Equal?
 - Talk It Over, Longman
Boys' Work or Girls' Work?
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A project of the California Department of Education, Youth, Adult and Alternative Educational Services Division, funded by contract #4213 of the Federal P.L. 100-297, Section 353 with California State University Institute and Hacienda La Puente USD. However, the content does not necessarily reflect the position of that unit or of the U.S. Office of Education . 1997