

Continuing Business as Usual: A Case Study of Hialeah, Florida

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INTRODUCTION

This article poses research questions about the issue of spatial distribution of immigrant women in urban environments and the impact of occupational segregation issues based on gender and race that is exacerbated by economic globalization. That is, how has the relationship between more recent émigrés and those of the past industrial expansion period changed? A case study is provided exploring the experiences of recently immigrated women from Cuba within the ethnic communities of Hialeah, Florida. How have they been absorbed into the employment sector of this community?

Recent Cuban émigrés, as well as low-income women across the nation, are experiencing a similar “spatial mismatch” (Queralt and Witte 1998 p. 455; Waldinger 1996 p. 35) between the availability of jobs with adequate wages (usually in suburban areas) and the areas where they reside (Allen and Kirby 2000). Complicating that factor is the spatial distribution of child care

services, nursing homes for elderly relatives, and the lack of public transportation between residential areas and the location of better paying jobs often in suburban areas. Commuting time is a significant factor because women strive to be close to their residences in order to balance their employment and family responsibilities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Migration streams from Europe in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s included migrants who worked long hours in negative and often hazardous working conditions to pave the way for an improved situation for their children. With employment opportunities available in textiles and manufacturing, the absorption of immigrants into the employment sector was swift. Tenement housing developed in urban areas within close proximity to major urban centers. As immigrants learned social skills and were assimilated into their environment they moved from the

lowest paying jobs to more skilled employment that increased wages, and improved housing options. Immigrants continue to take the place of those who follow the track of upward mobility. However, “the social ladder no longer works, or no longer works with similar force” (Waldinger, 1996, p. 40) due to global economic realities as well as differences between immigrant groups.

Moreover, advances in mass transit and the use of automobiles have widened the distance between residences and places of employment providing more options for workers. As the country developed there were eventually areas that became industrial development centers or districts (Sorenson 2003; Stafford 2003). This occurred even when the concept of efficiency was not consistent with the pattern due to the reliance on “social networks” or the concept of “social proximity” (Sorenson 2003 p. 515). This research note reviews the issue of the use of female immigrant labor in the manufacturing sector in a global economy. This subject requires additional attention within the industrial geographical literature.

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION, GLOBALIZATION AND THE SLOW-DOWN OF UPWARD MOBILITY

This social connection is pivotal when examining the spatial distribution of populations in urban centers based on the development of “ethnic niches” (Waldinger 1996 p. 4). Within these ethnic enclaves informal connections

are made for newcomers to take the place of their co-ethnic counterparts who have moved on to other employment. Waldinger (1996) referred to the economy in these areas that created a “virtuous circle” (p. 42) because the new immigrants who replaced earlier ones can be easily exploited as fluctuations in the economy or production needs occur.

However, this pattern is being altered due to the need for small manufacturers such as those in Hialeah to utilize low wages to remain competitive within a global economy and avoid moving their operations out of the country. This metropolitan area represents one of the top 25 areas noted across the country with expanding economies (Workforce Weekly 2004).

However, despite the positive business climate the impact of globalization is causing a significant change from prior social mobility patterns. Hiring recent immigrants with limited English proficiency is advantageous because it provides inexpensive laborers who are vulnerable to exploitation because of the cultural sense of belonging within the ethnic enclave. The abundant immigrant labor pool creates competition for employment between recent immigrants and the immigrants who have been in the country for a longer time period as well as the native population. The net effects include greater fluctuations in employment, lower wages, and longer work hours. For relatively recent Cuban émigrés,

there is also competition with immigrants from Central America, the Caribbean, native whites and African Americans (Zsembik 2000). Previous immigrants did not have to consider possible economic competition from their homeland because manufacturing plants could be relocated to these locales to reduce labor costs and stay competitive.

IMMIGRANTS, GENDER, GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION AND THE LABOR MARKET

Prior research exploring immigrant participation in the labor market has focused on the wage gaps without examining the social context. Personal choices to work within or outside the enclave are often complex and relate specifically to gender. Recent Latino émigrés are more likely to be economically disadvantaged within the labor market due to lower levels of education and lower labor force participation levels. Yet the increased presence in the labor market can bolster the family's economic resources enough to alleviate poverty among immigrant families (Greenlees and Saenz 1999; Bean, Leach and Lowell 2004). Greenlees and Saenz (1999) suggest a model for examining the role of immigrants in the labor market. Their theoretical model suggests that "women's employment is influenced by their personal (individual level) capital resources, household budgetary requirements (for individual married couples) that affect decisions for home or work production, and employment opportunities available" (p. 2).

Gilbertson's (1995) analysis of immigrants working within an enclave economy points to another aspect of the labor market experiences many immigrants have; co-ethnic exploitation in ethnic enclave economies. This is consistent with the findings of Nee, Sanders and Sernau (1994), who posit that there exists an inherently exploitative relationship between the co-ethnic worker and their co-ethnic employer based upon the need to have a readily accessible and abundant low wage labor pool. Although Sanders and Nee (1987) did not focus on women, Gilbertson (1995) does. She contends that women within the enclave are more likely to be exploited due to discrimination, occupational segregation and work/family conflicts that reduce wages and include a more narrow range of opportunities for women than men. For example, Zhou and Logan (1989) contend that Chinese women workers in New York City had no measurable earnings return on their previously attained human capital. Their participation within the enclave economy was based not only on the income they provide to support their family's needs because they also had to consider how their paid work would affect child care and other family responsibilities. Consequently, although wages outside the enclave were generally higher, those jobs often did not provide the hours and flexibility found with enclave employment (Zhou and Logan 1989). Enchautequi (2002) referred to job networks based on gender that produces "labor market segmentation

according to recency of arrival” (p. 594).

Females within the co-ethnic workplaces seek employment close to the enclave in order to reduce their commuting time and because they share a common language and culture (Logan and Zhou, 1989; Ellis, Wright, and Parks 2004). A Catalyst (2003) report identified the challenge of employers not recognizing Latinas definition of “family” (p. 2). This factor reduces opportunities for advancement because work responsibilities are viewed as temporary until their husbands can find jobs with higher pay. Therefore, the need to balance their jobs with their family responsibilities is paramount for them (Portes and Stepick 1993). Care of children, elderly family members (Kolb 2000) and the desire to focus on the needs of their husbands, referred to as machismo (Mayo and Resnick 1996) requires that they take employment that is close to their homes and with the shortest transit time on public transportation (Allen and Kirby 2000). This limits their accessibility to higher paying jobs that could lead to more responsibility in suburban or other employment areas that would be farther away. This balancing of home and family and employment demands is increasingly common to most females in America due to the need for two incomes to access or maintain a middle class existence. Compounding this issue is the decreasing ability to receive governmental assistance when females find themselves raising children as single-parents. Moreover,

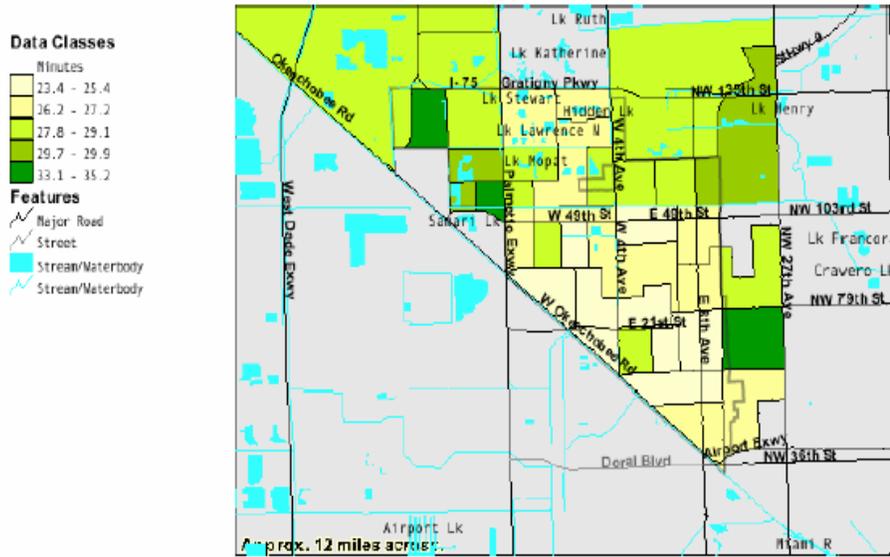
for new immigrants the ability to obtain governmental assistance is not possible (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, para. 2).

Low-wage workers of any race or ethnic group rely on public transportation and are often limited in their commuting time by familial responsibilities. As women seek jobs they often find “precarious positions in the workforce” (Allen and Kirby 2000 p. 7). Communities need to address this economic and social challenge by increasing the use of global information systems (GIS) to plot current commuting patterns with public transit routes, child-care centers, nursing homes and areas where employment will provide higher wages and more stability (Queralt and Witte 1998 p. 455).

CASE STUDY: HIALEAH, FLORIDA

With a population of 226,419, Hialeah represents an important economic base for Miami-Dade County (U.S. Census 2003). Over 90% of Hialeah residents , self describe as Latino, the majority are Cuban and Cuban American. More women reside in Hialeah than men. The median household income is lower than the national average at \$29,492 compared to \$41,994 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003, Summary File 1 (SF 1) and Summary File 3 (SF 3)). Their average travel time to work is 27.4 minutes slightly longer than the national average. This time would increase if workers would look to other regions of the county for employment opportunities.

Figure #1
Travel Time



Source: US Census (2000)

Adjacent to the middle and working class neighborhoods of Hialeah are manufacturing plants that produce and assemble a variety of goods from reading glasses and textiles to plastic novelty items. Recently immigrated Cuban women provide much of the needed labor. They have limited language skills and look to the factories for employment that is close to their ethnic enclaves. In Hialeah, the small factories are conveniently located near the Miami-Dade Counties public transportation bus routes.

The relationship between the immigrants and factories that hire them was explored to determine if employment in these factories provides sufficient benefits for the immigrants? The alternative is to travel from Hialeah to the city of Miami where their travel time

increases and the insecurity of leaving the predominantly Spanish speaking community is perceived as more of a risk.

An example of one manufacturer in the city of Hialeah is that of a plant that produces and manufactures inexpensive reading glasses costing \$7.99 to \$12.99, more than an hour's wages for the entry-level employee of \$6.50. Women primarily run the machines, assembling and polishing the glasses. Personal semi-interviews were conducted with 10 Latinas who recently migrated from Cuba and are married with children and work within Hialeah. Additionally, five (5) personal interviews were conducted of supervisors and management of the factories. Women such as Juanita (not her real name) polish glasses and place them on the line to the next

worker for packaging. Her view of her employment is positive.

Juanita: I am raising two children with this job. My husband's employment is not enough. I am luckier than most.

Juanita's male supervisor explains, "We would like to pay higher wages but that would be difficult in this economy. We are competing with cheaper wages from China and are always looking for ways to cut production costs."

This supervisor also stated that "we hire people who are willing to work at the wages we can afford to pay. Here that means new Latinos. We are a business and that means we have to make money. We are no different than other businesses here. We do what we have to do to stay in business". (Personal Interview)

CONCLUSION

Manufacturers in Hialeah, look to recent immigrants as an alternative to relocating their factories off shore and as an inexpensive alternative to the more expensive Anglo or African American laborer because they will work for the minimum wage with few benefits. The continued migration to the Hialeah area suggests that finding enough laborers will not be difficult for the foreseeable future. As immigrant women weigh the costs and benefits of the factory work they are likely to have different priorities. Their priorities include a focus on earning money to help the family's financial

outlook while still retaining the traditional family responsibilities that could be diminished if they would seek employment farther from the enclave. Close proximity to the workplace that does not require lengthy commutes appears to offset lower wages since the Latinas value being close to home. Thus, the issue of short commuting distances, access to cars and the availability of public transportation are key factors that require further study in addition to the more obvious language challenges that could appear to restrict Latinas to manufacturing jobs that exploit them.

Future research on this topic should be explored including how the use of GIS's can be more fully utilized when planning for public transportation corridors as well as the location of low-cost housing and child-care centers. Spatial distribution of public resources also needs to be explored as the effects of globalization are studied to determine if the tide of immigration will continue or possibly increase. Current and projected U.S. Census data indicate that immigration from the Caribbean Basin and Latin America will continue as economic and political push-pull factors create better opportunities for employment and political liberties that are not present in the immigrants' homeland. Urban centers with strong cultural bases such as Hialeah highlight globalization processes where immigrants in their new host community are able to access culturally defined goods and services and experience few cultural impediments such as language and

different social skills. Ironically, however, if they work in manufacturing positions they run a risk not encountered by prior immigrants and that is the threat of their job going to the land that they just left.

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