



Difficult Decisions

Elvira

Elvira, a 32-year-old mother, grew up uneducated in a rural area of the central Mexico state of Zacatecas. She had eight siblings. Her father picked crops. “We were so poor that my eldest sister picked up cardboard boxes to make us sandals,” she says.

To help her family, Elvira went to the state’s capital city and found work. She worked hard—cleaning, cooking and caring for children. Though her boss resisted, Elvira was allowed to enroll in school as long as her studies didn’t interfere with her duties. To keep her job and attend classes, Elvira began her day at 4 a.m. She eventually got her diploma.

But when her employers (falsely) accused her of stealing money, she returned to her village and married. “What else can I do here except get married?” she asks. “There weren’t stores to work in, there wasn’t anything.”

Soon poverty forced her hand again. Her husband decided to go north into the United States. She would follow later. Though they were living in extreme need, the decision was not easy.

“We didn’t have enough for food or shoes. We couldn’t do it anymore. But I thought, how? What if he dies? What if he doesn’t come back? What if he goes and leaves me? So many things go through your mind. But I thought, if I don’t risk anything, I can’t earn anything.”

Her husband crossed successfully. A year later, she attempted to cross. Elvira was determined. She wanted to keep studying and become a teacher. She believed in the promise that the United States has made to immigrants for more than 200 years: If you work hard, you will succeed here.

After two unsuccessful attempts, Elvira left Juarez in the early morning hours as the lone woman in a group of migrants planning to cross the Rio Grande. Abandoned by her guide, her third attempt to enter the United States failed, and she was detained by the Border Patrol. She made it across on her fourth try with the help of two teenage boys.



Araceli

Araceli says she arrived in the United States with the sole desire of finding work and providing for her family but now feels lost. “I’d like to be in a job that’s well-paid, good treatment, to better myself and others,” she says. “But I’m seeing that everything is very bad.”

After a treacherous crossing—she almost died in the desert—she eventually arrived in Georgia and took a job in a restaurant where her sister worked. Cutbacks left her without employment, however, and she migrated to Florida, where she found work at a nursery tending plants.

She lost the position, however, when a co-worker’s husband made an unwanted sexual advance. Though she says the man was clearly at fault, Araceli’s boss found

it simpler to get rid of the undocumented worker. After losing her job in November 2009, she found temporary, part-time work picking fruit but was driven from that job, again, by sexually explicit overtures, this time from her supervisor. She lasted less than a few weeks at each job and has not worked since. “I’m leaving it in the hands of God to see what happens,” she says. She is deeply concerned that she will not be able to repay the money she owes the coyotes who brought her over the border. “I owe \$2,500, and I don’t know where to find the money to liquidate that debt. And so many problems on top of it.”

Cristina

Soon after arriving in this country, Cristina found herself picking grapes in the heart of one of America’s most fertile farming regions: California’s San Joaquin Valley. Along with 15 to 20 others, she slept each night on a mattresses in a chicken coop that had been converted to a living quarters for the grape workers.

“The living conditions were horrible, because there was one bathroom for so many people,” she says. “You sleep there with men and women or children. And they’re deplorable conditions, dirty.” She slept lightly out of fear that “someone was going to do something to me.”

“I saw terrible things there. ... Sometimes, I heard about children being abused. But there’s no law, there’s no government. Everyone stays out of it.”

She worked seven days a week. The work was grueling, the pace unrelenting. There were few breaks.

Mornings could be cold and afternoons blazing hot. She had little protection from the elements.

Cristina was not accustomed to such hard labor. She grew up in the city in Mexico, where her father was a politician. She had attended college with the goal of being a teacher. But she made the mistake of answering an advertisement that promised good wages in the United States for educated people like her. She was told she would get her papers and would be working, legally, in an office.

Instead, at 18, she would become a victim of human trafficking. There were no papers. Her guides took her to the vineyard labor camp and left her there. “The people told me that, since I didn’t have documents—not my visa or anything—that I was working illegally in this country. They told me that if I made a move, if I tried to escape, they could kill me. Or they could take it out on my family in my country.”

If she went to the police, she was told, they would only put her behind bars.

After the first 12-hour day, Cristina cried. “I didn’t think I could make it.” But she had little choice but to return to the fields.

When payday came, Cristina was told there was no money for her—that she was working to pay off the expense incurred by those who had brought her to the United States. She had not been told this before. “I asked them how much I was going to have to pay. And they told me, ‘Oh, you have no idea. The debt is very large, but we’ll let you know when you’re done paying.’”

For six months, fear of the police and her captors kept her there. She had no way to contact her family in Mexico. “My father gave me [up] for dead.”

Finally, Cristina’s fear gave way to despair. She could no longer stand captivity. “I decided to escape one night. So, I ran, ran, ran until ... I found a person in a truck.”

The man, it turned out, was the owner of the farm. He was not aware of what was happening in his vineyards and that she was working, essentially, as a slave. The owner helped Cristina, who has remained in the United States and now works to help other exploited farmworkers.