

## **Why Not Stay: *Chapulineras* in Oaxaca and Alternatives to Emigration**

**Jeffrey H. Cohen**  
**The Ohio State University**

**Paulette K. Schuster**  
**Reichman University**

**Andrew Mitchel**  
**The Ohio State University**

**Francisco Alejandro Montiel Ishino**  
**National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences**

*The pressure to migrate is powerful in Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca's Central Valleys region saw a rapid, steep rise in emigration to the United States beginning in the 1990s. While the rate has slowed in recent decades, and in response to demographic forces that have impacted the area, there is still a steady flow of migrants moving to destinations within Mexico and to the United States. Yet not everyone chooses to migrate. In this paper, we review the work of chapulineras (market women who produce and sell chapulines, toasted grasshoppers) and note why they stay-put. Chapulineras have created a dynamic economy that is built upon working in the local market systems which generate a great deal of wealth. The successes that the majority of chapulineras welcome means they (and their families) reject migration and build comfortable lives locally. Reviewing the experiences of Oaxaca's chapulineras and their reticence to migrate contrasts with the expectation that most rural Oaxacans will choose emigration and leave their hometowns in search of opportunities.*

*Keywords: mobility, immobility and non-migrants, market women, rural Mexico, entrepreneurship*

The Central Valleys region of Oaxaca, Mexico saw a rapid, steep rise in emigration beginning in the 1990s and in response to economic hardship including the devaluation of the peso and the Tequila Crisis of 1994-95, a limited local labor market, poor educational opportunities, and discrimination (Bean et al. 1998; Durand and Massey 2019). For decades, Oaxacans have sought opportunities outside their hometowns, with up to 60% of a village's population emigrating to settle across the border in the United States (most often around Los Angeles and Santa Monica in California) or to a destination within the borders of Mexico (Cohen 2004). But some Oaxacans chose to remain at home. In this paper, we focus on *chapulineras*, women who sell toasted grasshoppers, *chapulines*. Chapulineras have created a dynamic economy and in the process they reject emigration.

## CHAPULINERAS

*Chapulineras* follow in the generational footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers as vendors and have created a dynamic economy based on unceasing demand. Rural, poor women (and in particular indigenous women) are often described as supplementing a household's income as their informal earnings are combined with the earnings of their husbands or fathers (see critiques in Rees 2006; Solano et al. 2021; Giambra and McKenzie 2021). However, *chapulineras* are not supplementing the efforts of others, they are the main breadwinners in their households. Furthermore, while their work may lack formal trappings and sit outside standard governmental regulations, *chapulineras* are part of a system that divides producers by their approach to the harvest and production, entrepreneurship and workplace and management of clientele. The market for *chapulines* is big and it is why *chapulineras* elect to remain in the state. In fact, during the spike in emigration rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, *chapulineras* did not leave their hometowns and created a touchless economy to meet local demand.

*Chapulineras* live full, comfortable lives and earn well in comparison to most working women in the region. *Chapulineras* are in the marketplace and on their mobile phones, they are putting in the time necessary to succeed. Their efforts are rewarded as they transform their homes and modernize kitchens and bathrooms, earn the money that will support their children's education, and effectively manage everyday challenges including accessing healthcare.

Success does not mean *chapulineras* can escape their precarity. Rural poverty and marginality are the backdrop to much of what they do. Biases are tied to their gender, their rurality, social class, education and, in at least some cases, indigeneity; and take both physical (dealing with medical challenges) and intellectual (assumptions of ability by outsiders) forms. Further complicating the situation, family members have come to expect that the *chapulineras* in their homes will also cover their needs.

*Chapulineras* chose to go it alone despite some other artisans and small-scale producers who are increasing their engagement with state programs, NGOs, and promoters. *Chapulineras* are not interested in expanding their efforts and they have little faith in outsider engagement of development specialists, assuming that most are looking for ways to make an impact that in the end will fail to expand the market.

The market for *chapulines* is large with tons of toasted grasshoppers moving annually from vendors directly to consumers in Oaxaca and elsewhere. Many *chapulineras* export globally to clients in the United States and elsewhere and will work with import/export brokers to reach expatriate communities in other parts of Mexico and abroad. Señora Carla Martínez described sales at home and abroad during a May 2023 interview in the Mercado Benito Juárez, "I have my people here, I have my people in Argentina . . . I have my clients. They call whether now or for the holidays and we get along. Yes, I have thirty years in this market with grasshoppers, in this business. From my grandparents to my family today."<sup>1</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, *chapulineras* developed a touchless economy based on the WhatsApp messaging platform in response to the state ordered closing of markets in March 2020. *Chapulineras* stayed in contact with clients, working with suppliers and managing orders virtually and online. Clients, many of whom were struggling to put food on the table, were able to purchase *chapulines* and opted to pay later. Managing and carrying debt is nothing new for these women. In fact, it follows on long traditions in the region as families creatively approach how best to manage their debts. Additionally, *chapulineras*' clientele are often neighbors. And while the women we interviewed are willing to wait for payment, they will not write off nonpayment or simply let clients skip out on their debt. The strength of the system they created is quite effective, and with the threat of the pandemic over and markets fully reopened, *chapulineras* continue to use WhatsApp and other social media tools, supporting further diversification and market growth.

The business of *chapulines* generates a lot of money and *chapulineras* know their product is valuable. The efforts of *chapulineras* fall into four categories:

- 1) Entrepreneurs who develop relationships that reach beyond their local communities to include tourists and restauranters in Oaxaca City. They place their energies on larger sales and contrasts with *chapulineras* who focus most of their energies on meeting family needs.
- 2) Local retailers whose clientele tend to originate in the community. Like entrepreneurs, these women are focused on sales. Nevertheless, they tend to have a smaller, limited clientele that is

often prescribed by the communities surrounding their hometowns. While entrepreneurs often work in markets in the city of Oaxaca, local retailers stay closer to home selling in regional markets in places like Zimatlán or Tlacolula.

- 3) Wholesalers fulfill large orders for other businesspeople. These women often operate storefronts that are set up to specifically support exports, and they often sell and ship to clients who have settled abroad.
- 4) The last group of vendors are chapulineras who focus their energy on providing for their own families. While these women may sell to others, the bulk of their efforts are geared toward feeding their families.

A kilogram of *chapulines* sold for an average price of MXN\$ 350.00 per kilogram, and *chapulineras* sold an average of just under 7 kilograms weekly for an income of approximately MXN\$ 2,450.00 per week during the summer 2022. Real sales ranged from a low of 1 or 2 kilograms a week to a high of 40 kilograms a week among the most active entrepreneurs.

The majority of sales are by entrepreneurs and local retailers to regular clients who have standing orders. Of minor importance are sales to tourists/foodies. These one-time opportunities are described as a bonus and while not something planned for are certainly welcomed as described by Carmen Mendoza in the Mercado Benito Juárez (May 2023): “There are more tourists, but they're a little bit different. They'll try some grasshoppers, peanuts, *chicatanas*. I say try it *güero*<sup>2</sup>, it has chile. But they are on vacation, so right now there are more but they'll leave.”

Whether a *chapulinera* is working from home or from the marketplace they are focused on their business. Minerva Garcia (interviewed in the Mercado la Merced, Oaxaca, June 2022) summarized her situation well: “It's me, nothing else. Nothing more [gesturing to her baskets of prepared *chapulines*] this here is it. My children help to harvest, and we put them together, clean them up and set them out by size. And you know, it is enough.” Carla Martinez (interviewed in Mercado Benito Juarez, June 2022) added, “I'm always here [in the market], every day, daily, I don't do anything more.”

## WHY NOT MIGRATE?

Moderate to extreme poverty traps many rural Oaxacans who find themselves marginalized and insecure in their daily lives (Núñez-Rocha et al. 2021). This is an extreme problem for Oaxacans and the state's indigenous peoples. Poverty and the fear of slipping into poverty are regular, everyday challenges and most *chapulineras* plan their days in response to economic uncertainty and marginality.

Confronted with these kinds of inequalities and burdened with poverty, migration would seem a reasonable alternative. But, as argued in *Cultures of Migration* (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011), the decision to go is costly, complex, and difficult. Migration depends on resources. Migrants need funds to cover their travel; they need connections to support their settlement; and they need opportunities to succeed.

Oaxacan migrants turn to family for the funds necessary to travel. They also depend on extended social and kin-based networks to make connections and manage settlement. Finally, they need to find opportunities, and often this means building upon familial and community connections as they access the labor market. The costs of border crossing and settlement continue to rise, particularly for Oaxacans who are crossing into the US with no papers. Opportunities are also hard to find, particularly for young men who often follow family and friends into low-skilled, low wage work.

*Chapulineras* are not among those migrating (and see Cohen 2002). They are earning incomes that are quite exceptional for rural women in Oaxaca. In fact, they typically outpace the wages paid formally in the region. They are also free of the pressure migration can put on families. Their fathers, husbands and children do not migrate but contribute in their own unique ways. Furthermore, the complex decisions that confront migrant women when they are forced to balance family, travel, settlement, and work, are not an issue.

*Chapulineras* have strong, active ties to their clients, including those who are family, friends and neighbors. The effort required to rebuild these strong, durable, and stable ties around resettlement is a cost that no *chapulineras* want to endure. Instead, they look forward to maintaining their ties to their clients and over time, creating new ties to young families as they are established.

Finally, when it comes to opportunities, *chapulineras* are clear about their desires. No one wants to change what they do. They are aware of the strength of their market, the power and control they hold over their customers, and the difficulty that is involved in building clientele. They see their efforts coming to fruition in the opportunities they are creating for their children, the support they can give to their parents and the homes they are refurbishing with their husbands.

## CONCLUSIONS

Working with *chapulineras* offers a corrective to the assumption that migration is inevitable from marginalized communities in the developing world. *Chapulineras* have created a vibrant economy in response to needs and their market continues to thrive, even as it did during the pandemic. Second, it is based on demand that dates back generations and makes sense. There is no need to push profitability over prosperity, which assumes that outside development specialists need to be involved. Finally, the ability of *chapulineras* to adapt, whether to the limits the pandemic placed on the local market, or the seamless way that many women have moved into the export business, embraces Alan Deutschman's (2007) business axiom business: change or die.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for this project was provided by the National Science Foundation Grant *Household Producer Effects of Rural Diet Transformation*, BCS award 1918324, 2019. Funding was also provided by two grants from the OSU Institute for Population Research: *An International Interdisciplinary Approach to Reducing Lead Contamination in Traditional Foods among Mexican Migrants in the US and Communities of Origin: The Contributions of Epidemiology, Anthropology and Community Development* (2007) and *The Cultural Meaning and Nutritional Value of Traditional Foods for Oaxacans in a Transnational Setting* (2006). An earlier version of this paper was presented at TMC Migration Conference 2024, Mexico City, Mexico, July 2024. Fieldwork took place in several waves including 2006, 2007 and from 2019-2023, and included *chapulineras* from throughout Oaxaca's Central Valleys who kindly opened their homes and market stalls as they shared their time and memories. We thank Maestra Nydia Dehli Mata Sanchez (Universidad Mesoamericana, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico) for her friendship and support throughout all phases of this project. The effort of Dr. Montiel Ishino, in part, was supported by the Intramural Program at the NIH, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (Z1AES103325). The content was solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of the National Institutes of Health.

## ENDNOTES

1. All interviews are translated from their original Spanish and edited to best capture the voice of the interviewee.
2. *Chicatanas* (flying ants), are a special delicacy that appears only briefly and following the first rains of the season. *güero* is a respectful colloquial term for person with fair complexion and typically blonde hair.

## REFERENCES

- Bean, F.D., Corona, R., Tuirán, R., & Woodrow-Lafield, K.A. (1998). The Quantification of Migration between Mexico and the United States. In *Migration between Mexico and the United States*, 1–90. Austin: Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United States Commission on Immigration Reform.
- Cohen, J.H. (2002). Migration and "Stay at Homes" in Rural Oaxaca, Mexico: Local Expression of Global Outcomes. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 31(2), 231–259.
- Cohen, J.H. (2004). *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Cohen, J.H. & Sirkeci, I. (2011). *Cultures of Migration: The Global Nature of Contemporary Movement*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Deutschman, A. (2007). *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Durand, J., & Massey, D.S. (2019). Evolution of the Mexico-U.S. Migration System: Insights from the Mexican Migration Project. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 684(1), 21–42.
- Giambra, S., & McKenzie, D. (2021). Self-employment and Migration. *World Development*, 141, 105362.
- Núñez-Rocha, G.M., Esqueda-Eguía, B.M., Salinas-Martínez, A.M., Ávila-Ortiz, M.N., Castro-Sánchez, A.E., Zambrano-Moreno, A., & Hernández-Ruiz, K.J. (2021). Differences in Social Determinants of Health between Urban Indigenous Migrants and Non-Indigenous People in North-Eastern Mexico: An Analysis to Prioritize. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 8464.
- Rees, M.W. (2006). Ayuda or Work: Labor History of Female Heads of Household from Oaxaca, Mexico. In P. Durrenberger & J. Marti (eds.), *Labor in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 87–109). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Solano, N., Lopez-Ercilla, I., Fernandez-Rivera Melo, F.J., & Torre, J. (2021). Unveiling Women's Roles and Inclusion in Mexican Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF). *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 7, 617965.