



# REALIDADES: MEXICAN AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN MINNESOTA—VIDEO SCRIPTS

## Introduction

Hispanics are now the largest minority population in the United States and Mexico is the leading country of origin for U.S. immigrants. In Minnesota, workers emigrating from Mexico comprise a significant portion of the agricultural labor force in the food processing industries—mainly in the southern part of the state. There is considerable information about the challenges of immigrant workers from Mexico yet critical aspects of Mexican worker’s lives—such as their families in Mexico and the ongoing struggles they face—are often neglected. To better understand these transnational families’ situations, we’ve talked to four Mexican workers who have ties and support families in Mexico. In this video, you will hear their perspective and their personal stories about their new life in Minnesota, and their challenges and experiences in the workplace. You will also hear from an employer who will share his experience about working with Latino employees. By addressing some of the complex challenges Latino employees face, we hope to shed light on key issues and to open a dialog that may lead to increased understanding between workers and employers for long-term, mutually beneficial results.

## The Decision to Leave

### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

The main reason why I came to work in Minnesota is because of the lack of opportunity that one has, well in this case, Mexico. Another reason is that I wanted a future for my family: my children—that’s really the main reason why I am here. My children will have a chance for a better education here than they would have had in Mexico. I say this because not all of us have the opportunity to go to school which is what helps a person get ahead.

### Reyna Thomas, Food Processing Worker

The reason I came to this country—for my parents. I came from a family of 13 brothers and sisters. So, the economic situation was the reason for coming—to help my parents and to help myself, support myself; and be independent at a young age. My parents depend on me; every two weeks or every month I send them an amount. I won’t say exactly how much but yeah...they wait for it. Now, one by one, my sister...me...we are bringing more...a sister, a brother, to migrate here to help the family. So my parents can have a better life... because you do this for your parents, and for yourself too, you know.

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

The main reason I came to the United States was to work and help my family. To support my family, because sometimes in our country...sometimes it is hard. There is work—I don’t deny that—but it’s hard to be there and support your family. So that is one of the main reasons I emigrated to the United States.

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## Leaving Family Behind

### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

Well, when I first came here I came alone. I left my wife and kids in Mexico. My parents also. We were raised to believe that sometimes you may need to support your parents and even your grandparents. And so I came here for my family—my wife and my kids...but for my parents, too. At first, like I said before, I came alone. And it was very difficult for me to be by myself because I didn't know what was going on with my family in Mexico. About a year—year and half—later, my wife and two kids came. This was my first goal I set for myself when I came here—that they will follow after—and I did it. And right now I have my mom, my dad, and three brothers there that somehow depend on me economically. I talk with them regularly—every week or two—but you see that's the problem you face here: the fact that you live always with the uncertainty of not knowing what's going on with them there in Mexico.

### Maria Manuela R. de Gonzalez, Retired Food Processing Worker

When I came here to Minnesota I left all of my family in Mexico. My children, my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters who were depending on only one person—me—the one who was working. It is really sad and hard because once you are here, you need to find a way to make enough money not just for those who were left behind but for us to live here. Pay the rent, buy clothes and food; and it is very sad because I wouldn't have money for a pair of shoes because I had to say send money to my family in Mexico.

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

You worry because they are so far away and you are here. So one of the things that drives me to work hard—like I said before—is that I know that they believe in me, and they know that I will stick with them. And they are my family, and it's for them that I work hard. That's why I happily throw myself into my work. It's what keeps me going.

### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

Well, having my relatives still in Mexico is a responsibility. I don't see it so much as an obligation, as I don't look at it as a burden. I do it with enthusiasm. They are my parents. I have brothers who are still in school and this drives me to work harder, and to do the best that I can do to take care of my job, because jobs are very scarce these days. But it is a beautiful responsibility. I am very proud and I think that they are also very proud that I am helping them. Because your family—I'll say it this way—your family that is in Mexico when you come to the United States is like...let's say, it's like they have mixed feelings. I think because it's a relief that the financial situation will be better but at the same time we don't know if we will ever see each other again alive. So, it drives me. It's something that I do with great enthusiasm.

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## Balancing Family with Job Responsibilities

### Ron Durst, Durst Brothers Dairy

The workers understand that there's an impact on our business if they go back to Mexico and come back: the fact that somebody has to do the work for them. But, I do understand that feeling because I remember when I was about 24 years old, I moved to another state and was by myself and worked, and how lonesome I was at first by doing that. It was a tough thing for me to do, so I understand that and so we try to work with the people as much as we can, and at the same time run our business to allow them to do that. There are situations where if they tell me that they are going to be back at such and such a date—say it's within a month—I'll hold their job open and try to accommodate them. But if they tell me they are going to come back in a month and show up three months later, then you know there may or may not be a job at that time for them. I need to know to plan my work here to have labor and to accomplish that. So, there has to be a mutual understanding between the two of us about what the expectations are going to be. If they need to suddenly...say there is a family emergency at home; that they need to go right now—a death in the family or you know, a parent in the hospital or this type of thing—they need to go. And we understand that, and we will work around that.

### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

Sometimes you carry worries with you. You can't just put aside the things that you worry about. Every now and then you have to carry them even though you try not to bring it to work. But sometimes, you can't just put them aside so easily—especially, when there are things that are happening to family members that you love very much. Something that happened to me four years ago—I say this to share with everyone—one of my sisters died. She was 22 years old. I couldn't be with my parents; I couldn't be there with her during that sad moment. This is something I still can't forget about because I have to think, what if? What if I had gone to Mexico? Why didn't I go? However, it will have been like to start over again. Going away will have created so much turmoil.

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

Once I had to leave the country for almost two months for an illness in the family. So that affected my work and the economic situation. I had to leave the country for two months because my parents were sick. And for the same reason that I went down there for, I had to come back here. Because of his sickness I had to return here to work, because it was more important to keep working to help my dad with his medical expenses. Yes, it gets to you. It gets to you but it benefits you at the same time. Because if you look at it positively—even though it affects you to have to leave to be with your loved ones in Mexico—you know that when you return here, you are able to help your family with the medical expenses which are really tough in Mexico.

### Maria Manuela R. de Gonzalez, Retired Food Processing Worker

So, unfortunately I'm not the only person—we all work with a sadness and a feeling that we are here to do what they say. And we do what they say with the sadness that if family members get sick, you already know that you are going to lose your job because they won't give you the option to go to Mexico. If they would look to the needs of the worker, the worker would be even more motivated to work harder and with more enthusiasm. For example, your mother is there, very sick in Mexico. You ask: "Can you please give me permission to go?" They say: "Wait..."

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today or tomorrow we will see how it goes”—because work comes first—and then they say you can not go. No one wants to lose their job because there are a lot of family members who depend on you. So, you go to work but now you are not working well—because your mind is on other things—and that’s when accidents happen. Maybe you smash a finger or you get caught in a machine. Or maybe it is just that you can not do your job well because your mind is not on your job.

## The Relationship with the Employer

### Ron Durst, Durst Brothers Dairy

I have a lot of employers who have been with me for a long time. And some of them..I think the longest one (Hispanically) has been with me, oh, about 15 years I would say. But one of the things that makes us successful is that all three of us that work on the farm are very engaged with the people who work for us. Meaning, we work with them on jobs and so we see what’s going on. And normally here on our farm and at the dairy, anyway, if we’re going to try something new, I will normally try it out myself and see where the glitches are going to be and try to streamline all that before I turn it over to them—to make things smoother, and so we’re constantly trying to streamline things, make things easier for our workers to get things done. I always tell the story about my early experience with a Latino worker. We had our old farm, which is about half a mile from here—an older farm. I typically worked with them at night doing hospital cows. And so I’d come in at midnight—one-two o’clock, whenever it was—and work with them at night. And after a period of time you know they watched me very intently to see what I’m doing so they can learn what to do and so after a period of time went by. And one evening, and I will never forget this, one of them came over to me and said: “Señor Ron, why don’t you go over here and sit down and we’ll take care of the work for you.” And, uh, to me it was probably one of the moments that I’ll never forget. And I tell my kids the same thing, you want to impress your employer just tell them: “Hey, I’ll take care of this for you and you don’t need to worry about it.”

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

I will appreciate it if the bosses take into consideration the needs of the Hispanic: the need related to when we have to leave the country, whether it’s my boss or other employers or farmer. I will like them to realize that sometimes you have to leave the country for an emergency. That they understand this and so they don’t think: “Well, he has left so he doesn’t have a job.” This is what I would like them to keep very much in mind.

### Maria Manuela R. de Gonzalez, Retired Food Processing Worker

I work for the top boss for many years. I would like it if they would work with Mexican employees and treat them with humanity. The bosses complain that there are many accidents; that they pay many thousands...when they could save them money, by giving that person permission to go home for a bit and then come right back, and give them back their job because typically when they come back the work is not there. This will be a good rule because they are good workers. They know their jobs and that will cost employers to train a new person from scratch. They will save much more. This is one of the things I would say to them.

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### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

An experience that happened to me with another employer when I first came here. I was working in the fields picking cucumbers, pumpkins, and cauliflower, and so. My family was still in Mexico. I think this happened for lack of understanding of our culture; that's what I will call it. My wife sent me some things from Mexico—some letters and that kind of thing. And I asked my boss permission to go get them at the post office. He didn't want to let me go. We were working from six in the morning to six at night and I would need maybe a half hour. But they were open work hours to get them from the post office. He told me that I couldn't leave work because it would mess up the shift. I told this to a co-worker next to me and he said to me: "Go, and nothing will happen. This is your family and your business. The only one who is going to care about them is you." I didn't want to lose my job. I didn't want to go without permission because I wanted to keep my job, but I went and came back. I went without telling my boss. I came back and fortunately, this time, he understood the situation. He asked me if everything was okay. He asked me if I liked the things that they sent me. I told him yes. But I think what is lacking sometimes from the employers is a sensitivity towards our needs. Besides, there are more things that make you feel that they are recognizing your hard work. Your presence on the job and the help that you are to them.

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

I can say that my relation with my employer has been good to this point. Because we talk a lot about Mexico, about my family there, and about his farm and work. But, the relation is good more than anything else because of the communication. My part and his part. He understands me and I understand him. So, whenever something doesn't seem right to him or me, we get together and we talk about it. So, between me and my employer this has helped a lot—for me and for him.

## Improving the Relationship

### Francisco Guerrero, Dairy Worker

I will like it if we will have more social contact. Not just at work but all of the functions. Whatever it is—the church, whatever—just have more contact...more social contact from both sides. This will help in a lot of things, not just work, to have more contact outside of work.

### Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

Well, I think that to improve the relationships between employer and employee it will be a good idea maybe if the employers had meetings and ask us questions about our countries, what we like about there in Mexico, what we think about here. That they can see the hardships we had to face coming from different cultures to this one. That they will try to understand us more so that they wouldn't see us as just workers but they will try to show them that they want to know about the person too. Not just to see us as employees—a source of labor—but to have more person-to-person relationship, you know.

### Reyna Thomas, Food Processing Worker

It would be good if they understood a little more about us so that we could communicate it better, because we are good workers. I think we Mexicans are very, very hard workers. Why? Because we always have two things

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on our mind: our family at home and our new future in this country. I would like it if the employers would think a bit about how hard it is to leave your family in a country so far away and commit totally to this country. That they will understand this a bit because they know that we are very good workers and if sometimes the work is not good enough or wasn't done right, it is for lack of communication due to the language and because we have very different customs from this country. It will be good if they would understand this and that we are here to better ourselves and get ahead in this country and live the American dream. Have been here twenty two years and I haven't got a debt yet.

## **Bridging the Language Divide**

### **Ron Durst, Durst Brothers Dairy**

Probably the most challenging aspect of working with the people is probably the language part of it. And we... we manage that by...we have probably about 4 or 5 people here. Three of them speak very good English and two or three others that speak English fairly well. And so, that's how we communicate with the rest of the crew. The people who can speak English talk to me in English because I know some key words in Spanish, but not enough to be able to communicate with them. But, you know, there are a lot of other ways to communicate besides the spoken word—by demonstrating what you want done—and they pick up very quickly on that. And here we train and we re-train so to keep our procedures that we want done each day very similar each day. And so we have meetings typically every other week with the crew here. And I find it needs to be about every other week to really keep people well-trained and it shows them that you know we are engaged in what we are doing. Because most of the people that work for me—and I think this is common on most farms where these people work—if they sense something is not important to me, it's not important to them. And so, having these meetings reinforces what I think is important and they pick up on that. And that's how we improve things.

### **Reyna Thomas, Food Processing Worker**

But I think that the most difficult thing when you get to this country, more than anything, is the language. Like when you're work in a plant, sometimes you want to say something and there is just no way to communicate it with your supervisor worker if they are Americans. And well, it is difficult sometimes. Sometimes something is hurting or you are feeling sick and you can not communicate that.

### **Maria Manuela R. de Gonzalez, Retired Food Processing Worker**

When the boss speaks to us Hispanics that don't speak English, he uses an interpreter. And in this, also, there are a lot of errors, cause the person who is speaking with the boss thinks that the person is interpreting correctly and the interpreter is really saying it in his own way. This is a problem.

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## Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

It will be a good idea if the employer will set aside time for classes—even like a break for fifteen minutes—with a person who is interested in teaching us a little bit of the language. It will be a good incentive too, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way.

## Maria Manuela R. de Gonzalez, Retired Food Processing Worker

For me, since then, I have come to understand that it is very important to learn English—very important. Me, when they set up an opportunity when they are giving classes in English—whether in the evening or in the morning—I get up and I go—even if it is just for an hour—because it never goes more than an hour—and I go. And I get desperate because there were two or three months there weren't any. And I said to myself: "But why?" And it goes that way in bits of pieces. I say: "No. I want to learn more." I went to the bookstore and I bought a package to learn English for the computer. But it is is all in English!

## Alberto Gallardo, Dairy Worker

When I speak with my boss we try to understand each other. He speaks a little Spanish and I speak a little English and we mix them both.

## Conclusion

The decision to leave came when the migrants-to-be realized that their circumstances were so bleak that they could not sustain their families locally. Leaving became the only possible way to fulfill a deep, moral responsibility to provide for one's family. In reality, migrants never really leave their families behind. They are permanently on their minds. Whatever sacrifice they made, it is with their family's wellbeing in mind. Workers feel ongoing push-pull desires to provide and visit their families in Mexico. But the cost of leaving their job here, even for short periods of time, pose a huge challenge for workers. Understanding employees' culture, situations, and challenges is key to improving communications. Migrants want to be seen as individuals rather than just employees. Most Latino workers agreed that learning to speak English fluently was the fundamental way to improve employer relations. Lacking necessary language skills deeply frustrates Latino employees, and hinders their ability to effectively communicate their ideas and needs. Minnesota's agricultural industry relies on the skills and labor of workers from Mexico. These workers count on these jobs in Minnesota to earn income to support their families in Mexico and Minnesota. These Mexican workers stories are American dream stories. That have persisted since the founding of