

August 15, 2005

Invisible to Most, Women Line Up for Day Labor

By NINA BERNSTEIN

The women are not noticed by the weekday morning crowds that rush past Eighth Avenue and 37th Street, in the heart of Manhattan's fashion district. They arrive in twos and threes after 8 a.m., shrinking against the buildings on both sides of the avenue, until scores of them are waiting, small, dark-haired Mexicans, Ecuadoreans, Hondurans.

By noon they have vanished. In swift, discreet sidewalk negotiations, perhaps half have been hired for a day's work at the minimum wage or less in some of the neighborhood's last struggling garment factories. The rest have given up until tomorrow.

A few miles away in Williamsburg, commuters on the busy Brooklyn-Queens Expressway are equally oblivious to the similar scene unfolding on an overpass above them. There, the work at stake is \$8-an-hour housecleaning, and those vying for a day's scrubbing, mainly for Hasidic homemakers, stand in a crude ascending hierarchy of employer preference: Mexican and Central American women in their 30's at the back, Polish immigrant women in their 50's and 60's in the middle, and young Polish students with a command of English at the head of the line.

At a time when male day laborers have become the most public and contentious face of economic immigration to the United States, these two rare female shape-ups have doubled in size almost unobserved in recent years. Their growth reflects a larger overlooked reality: Women make up 44 percent of the nation's low-wage immigrant work force, and worldwide, studies show, more and more women are migrating for work.

Often invisible and undercounted, experts say, female economic migrants are an increasing presence, especially in big cities like New York, where the demand is not for men to pick lettuce or process poultry, but for women to pick up the scraps of a collapsed manufacturing sector, or to serve in the vast underground economy of domestic service.

Although more women across the country are showing up in day-labor hiring halls, often run by grass-roots labor groups, experts say that these two female shape-ups may well be the only significant ones of their kind in the nation -- places where women are willing to put their personal safety in jeopardy for a few hours of work.

"What else is there to do if you have nothing to eat?" asked Rosario Jocha, 49, still standing on Eighth Avenue at 11 a.m. on a recent Wednesday. She said she had recently grabbed a day's work cutting threads from jackets even when the employer, a Chinese immigrant subcontractor, insisted he could not pay more than \$5.75 an hour, 25 cents below the state minimum wage. "I've been here 11 years, and I still haven't found a stable, steady job."

At both locations, some of the women waiting for work had been in the country as little as a few months; others, like Ms. Jocha, a Queens resident from Ecuador, were old-timers who spoke of better jobs lost when small-business employers could not pay rising rent. On Eighth Avenue, merchants said that 100 to 150 women regularly sought work six mornings a week year round --

double or triple the number when the intersection first emerged as an informal female hiring site about six years ago.

Yet May Chen, a vice president of Unite, the garment workers' union, whose headquarters is only a dozen blocks away, said she was unaware of the shape-up's existence until she was asked about it for this article. And Aaron Adams, a veteran garment center landlord who passes by every day, said he had assumed the women standing there "were just shooting the breeze."

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, a sociologist who has written extensively about the feminization of migration, said she was not surprised. "The space that these women occupy, the public spaces in the city, are just like fleeting moments," she said. "They don't really have a place in the city that's visible, so it's easy to ignore them."

Even the discussion of legal guest worker proposals in Congress centers on male migrants, she said. But though nationally men account for about two-thirds of labor migration among illegal immigrants, primarily because of agricultural demand, she said, global patterns indicate that women are easily half the immigrant workers flowing to large metropolitan areas like New York.

Ms. Parreñas and other researchers find that women who migrate for work are likely to be single mothers supporting children in their native countries. Compared with their male counterparts, they earn less, despite higher levels of education, according to a 2002 study of the United States' low-wage immigrant work force by the Urban Institute, a research group in Washington, which estimated that two million foreign-born women made less than the minimum wage. Yet women are also more likely to remain in America, and they send home a higher proportion of their earnings.

Unvarnished lessons in global supply, demand and division play out at both New York hiring sites.

"We never talk to the Latinas -- sometimes they agree to work for less," said Teresa, a 53-year-old Polish widow who, like many of the 60 women waiting for cleaning work near Marcy and Division Avenues in Williamsburg on a recent Friday morning, would give only her first name.

At the other end of the curved concrete abutment, Maria, 35, from Ecuador, gave a shrug. "They pay them more," she complained, as a woman in Hasidic dress passed by the Spanish-speaking group and selected a tall young Polish woman. "It's just that they're white."

Even among the Poles, immigration complicates the pecking order. Some older women won green cards after years as live-in maids for sponsors, and boast in broken English of children in college. Other women lack papers, or shuttle on temporary work visas between their struggling families in rural Poland and spartan, overpriced rooms in Brooklyn. And in summer, just when demand declines because of employer vacations, they now face growing numbers of young Polish women working illegally on tourist visas while living rent-free with Brooklyn relatives.

"They don't want babushkas," complained Zofia, a 50-year-old mother of five, as a young Hasidic man led Justyne, a 24-year-old Polish student, to his S.U.V.

Not all employers had the same preferences, however, and most, like Rifky Kohn, 28, a pregnant mother of four, were on foot. At midday, with the Sabbath approaching, she gladly hired a Polish woman in her late 60's.

"She looks more experienced," explained Mrs. Kohn.

Rosa Yumbra, who supports four children in Ecuador, recently skipped a day on the overpass to address a national conference of day labor organizers at New York University Law School. She spoke at the urging of the Latin American Workers Project, an advocacy group in Brooklyn.

"We suffer the changing weather throughout the year, the heat of the sun and cold in winter, because where we wait to be picked up is on the corner," Ms. Yumbra said in Spanish to an audience that included the mayor's commissioner for immigrant affairs. "Help us secure a space where we can be safer."

For now, the women depend on one another and their own instincts for safety. On a recent Wednesday, when a man on Eighth Avenue approached a young Mexican woman with a vague description of a part-time job in a store at the Port Authority, an older woman drew close and signaled disapproval. The man, who gave his name as Victor Miranda and his age as 55, then turned to Josefa Limas, 32, who arrived from Puebla, Mexico, only six months ago.

She, too, shook her head. "Sometimes they'll just end up taking you somewhere else," she said, describing another woman's close call the previous day. "An Indian man took her to an elevator and wouldn't let her out. He came over and tried to grab her. She pressed an emergency button and got away."

Still, the pressure to take chances can be strong. Nellie, 32, who shares a room in the Bronx, pulled out a picture of the three children she left four years ago with her sister in rural Ecuador, in an effort to earn money for the heart operation needed by her son, the youngest.

"The little I make here I send to him," she said. "Many times I just want to go to be with him, but I don't have the money to do so. It gives me a desperate feeling."

On this day she counted herself lucky: she had been called back for a second day's work at \$6 an hour, she said. And leaving the line, she melted into the crowd.