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# Social Work in Cadereyta, Mexico: Building the Future

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### **Social Work in Cadereyta, Mexico: Building the Future**

As a sophomore in college, I still think the career path that I want to take is that of a social worker. Ever since elementary school I have switched my “I want to be”s from early childhood/elementary education or social work. I initially wanted to be a teacher because I have always thought receiving an education is very important in one’s development. It is important to be knowledgeable because in return you receive empowerment. Also because for me, receiving an education in the States, was very valuable that in return I wanted to help other children acquire education.

But as I grew older I started to see the social injustice in the world. I never saw the disadvantages of forming part of a minority in the States. Now when I say that ‘receiving an education is very valuable’ it can be referred that I think this because I am Hispanic, come from a low-income family, and form part of a disadvantageous minority. Therefore it holds more weight or value in comparison to someone whom receiving education was never a question. However, I never saw those disadvantages. I never saw the struggle. To me, I knew that, it was what it was. I knew that I was Hispanic; I knew my parents were not rich, and I knew that my American friends had different customs than my family and I.

Again with time and continuous education, I learned that success was not just dependent on the person’s will but also on society and its system.

I grew frustrated knowing and learning more about the injustice we had, and while being a lawyer sounded like a good career, I did not want to directly punish someone for causing unfair treatment or hatred. Instead, I wanted to know why the behavior, why those thoughts, and what I could do to help to change that behavior and hurtful thoughts to further prevent them. It was then I knew that I wanted to do social work. I define social work like this: assisting anyone with an emotional, financial, physical, or social problems reach success by finding alternative solutions and/or resources; as well as be an advocate for social justice. This still continues to be my career goal.

So during spring break, I traveled to Mexico to Cadereyta, Nuevo Leon, my hometown. In my time there I spoke with a social worker. Her name is Maria de Los Angeles. She works at a local school with children with special needs. She has been in the field of social work for 25 years and counting. She has no children of her own, but she considers the children she helps as if they were her own. She is knowledgeable and wise beyond her years in the field. It was really a worthwhile experience and I was very honored to be able to learn so much.

The purpose to my interview was to talk to her about the education system and the issues that were within the education system. But before I can share with you the experience and all I learned, it is important to know about the Mexican economy, social stratification, gender roles, and values. Only then will it be easier to understand the actions of the Mexican people.

Mexico is a free-market economy with “a mixture of modern and traditional industry and agriculture.” (Mexico). Some of Mexico’s most manufactured goods are motor vehicles, food, beverages and clothing with Mexico City and Monterrey being the most abundant (Mexico). Jobs in Mexico are based on qualifications but mostly accessed through personal networks.

Women in difference to men earn less, are more likely to be underpaid, as well as have a lower level of education. Also, a majority of women are held accountable for the responsibilities of the household while men continue to be the breadwinners.

In comparison to other Latin countries, Mexico has a high unequal distribution of wealth. (Mexico). Unlike the United States, where we have a set system for social stratification; Mexico has that and many other symbolic ways to mark class differences. For example, the wealthy people of Mexico live in enclosed, private guards. They are also the ones to have the best vehicles and clothing. Whereas the poor live in small homes, sometimes overcrowded. Their method of transportation is walking to places, mainly because a vehicle is not affordable. And most of their clothing comes from second-hand stores or what you would call here, “garage sales”.

The stereotypes and roles of the males and females is similar to the one here in the States. Females are defined as ambiguous. More often than not, women are seen as submissive, self-sacrificing, but virtuous. In contrast, men are seen as *machista*, or a male chauvinist. Acts of violence, power, aggression and sexual assertiveness can be associate with this concept. This has encouraged the idea of male dominance and female motherhood (Mexico).

Values in the Mexican culture vary depending on each individual family system. Most value marriage, family, hard work, and religion. Education is valued but often seen as an additive rather than an essential idea. I know in my family our values are greatly placed on hard work and the family system. Education is supported if wanted but definitely not enforced.

Majority of Mexican women marry young in Mexico. The marriage is seen as a prestigious event. The ceremony consists of a civil registration or religious wedding (Mexico). A wide range of family and friends are invited. For couples that are recently married, most first go to live with the family of the husband for a few years to save up money to start their own home. Therefore, the nuclear home is typical. However, the majority of households are those that are made up of the extended family. An extended family consists of a number of relatives living together, such as parents, children, grandparents, great grandparents, etc (Zastrow, pg. 181).

Mexican families are often large. “The extend family is of crucial importance to most Mexicans” (Mexico). While most families live in great distance from each other, sometimes due to international migration; on special occasions, specifically those that are religious like a baptism, the family gathers to host a big celebration. Kinships are established through religious ceremonies (Mexico). It is the family and the kinships built that serve as sources of trust, solidarity, and support (Mexico).

Other values include that of hard work and religion. Families often enforce employment more than education in their children to help lessen the family financial struggles. At an early age, children are taught to take care of their family members. Not always directly using those words, but through different actions and advice. For example, my grandma, any time I speak with her after our conversation she always tells me, “Take care of your mom and siblings”. In difference to my mom, my grandma also always tells us to go to church, to pray and to have faith. Religion is another value in the Mexican culture. Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in Mexico (Mexico). The Virgin of Guadalupe is the symbol of the Mexican faith and religion.

Children in Mexico are quickly integrated into the activities of an adult. However they are overprotected and are not encouraged to explore the world on their own. Often they are held close and watched causing a close-minded mentality. Children are able to start kindergarten at age four. After kindergarten the requirement is that they attend school for six years, so up to sixth grade. Children attend either a public or private school. Teachers of public schools emphasize civic values, while those in private schools emphasize religious values (Mexico). Higher education is seen as a pathway to socioeconomic progress. However, due to financial issues, most cannot afford higher education.

Now this is what I learned in my visit with the social worker in relation to the Mexican economy, social stratification, gender roles, and values which are marriage, family, hard work, religion, and education. Mrs. Maria de Los Angeles makes a reference that the economy is very poor. There is a lot of unemployment. She states, “the main [issue] is lack of employment”. She did not touch base on social stratification because in my opinion, she only knows what she can see. She made a few references to the unequal socioeconomic statuses. For example she mentioned that families work to be able to provide the essentials to live not for the luxuries. “Those that have luxuries, have them because they make a lot of money and continue to make a lot of money”. She supports the ideas of the gender roles mentioned earlier. She claims that males continue to have the upper hand in the family as well as be the breadwinners, while females continue to be stay-home mothers and take care of the house duties. She strongly feels that the values in the family system have been lost. She adds that the married couples now and families no longer have respect for one another. Hard work in adults continues to be present, however in the children not often seen. Which she refers to back to the values being lost.

Religion, according to her, is still important in the family homes. Whereas education, aside from kindergarten to middle school, is not fully encouraged or supported by the parents.

Her focus was mainly on the education system. She added that the education system was not always fair between schools in town and in the outskirts of town. For example, she said that the in town schools offered a balanced healthy meal for their students. Then for the students that attended the schools on the outskirts of town, their meal was either brought from home or what the school could offer, a lot of which was junk food. Something that really caught my attention was when she told me a story of a neglected student. This student was only in elementary school. He missed a lot of school. As a social worker, her job was to speak to the teacher then the parents to investigate why the child was not attending school. She first approached the teacher. She asked him why the student was not presenting himself to school. The teacher responded saying that he didn't know. Then when she told him that she would have to make a visit to the child's parents to make them send their child back to school, he frankly commented and said, "No don't do that, he only comes here to cause trouble." I was speechless.

Listening to that story and having done the research, I concluded that each issue in the education system correlates to the issues in the family system. If there is no balanced, stable family environment, education most likely than not will not be present in the household. Children are not going to school because they don't have any reinforcement or support from their parents.

In Mexico, because the economy is not good, parents spend a lot of their time working. Considering that the male parent has the upper hand and is the one to regulate behavior in the household, my question then is; how is it expected for children to behave well and have a good

upbringing if the male parent is not home? Because it is also not alright to not spend time with your children but then when it comes to misbehaving to quickly and directly punish them.

It takes more than that to understand and change the behavior. It takes knowing what causes it to be able to target the cause rather than the effect. Only then it will help further prevention. And if the mother only hold the responsibility of the household such as cleaning, cooking, take care of the children; how are they able to force the children to behave well and do well if they are given so little power? And if the husband is continuously out of the home due to excessive work hours the women are left with no support. To make matters worse, if the children are in bad shape, misbehaving and rebelling, it is often blamed on the woman. So who is it to blame?

Personally, I blame society. Society's fault for holding certain expectations on genders. It is society's fault that the family system has been altered from stability. And who makes up society? We do. Each individual person forms a part of it and our behavior defines it. It's a cycle.

When there is lack of employment, individuals, especially those with a family, work double the hours to provide for their family. In order to provide the family's necessities, they must sacrifice time spent with the family. Then during that time away, the children are the ones mostly affected. They feel lonely and as if they have no support because the parents are no longer giving any attention to them. So children start to rebel, do what they want, back away the academics, and end up looking for attention in the streets. If not caught or stopped soon enough, they follow the negative influences in the wrong path. "Bad children" can cause separation in marriages mainly because the blaming as to which parent had the responsibility initiates. This only makes the situation worse because then the child now surely feels alone and at times guilty or at fault for the divorce.



At the end, there is no family, no education, and no sense of wholeness. So when the child later marries, he or she is most likely to follow in the same footsteps as the parents. The cycle then repeats.

Unlike the States, where we have many resources to help prevent the issues mentioned above, Mexico has very little to none resources. The schools do provide counseling, social workers, and psychologists for students. However, each one is limited to certain days and hours because they each work in two or more schools at a time. So neither one gives full attention to one school. And how I see it, it is like starting a project, leaving it unfinished, and starting another one.

Being there and having the interview with Mrs. Maria de los Angeles, I was able to realize that I wanted to help. I want to help my Mexican community better stabilize themselves without losing those values we so strongly uphold as a culture. I would like to work in Mexico, my home country for a while. I want to help by bringing new ideas, new systems and programs that I have learned in the States that I've seen to help better situations. For example, just adding extracurricular activities in schools for children to form part of. Mainly to give them something to look forward to when coming to school. Then I would like to explore the rest of the world and help other countries because I believe that everyone should have an opportunity for growth and development. And while some of us are fortunate to be born into a family where struggle is not always felt, the rest of us know and can define struggle to the extent of the word. And I want to take part in relieving struggle off many.

**Mrs. Maria de los Angeles and I after the interview.**



**These are picture of the school where Mrs. Maria de los Angeles works. This the playground, gym and cafeteria.**





**This is the hallway from the entrance of the school.**

**Here is where the children eat. These are the tables. They don't really have a "cafeteria".**





**This is the view from the entrance of the school.**

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