



Difficult Decisions

Elvira's story: The Decision to Go

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. Her brother went first, while she waited in Nogales, a Mexican city along the border with Arizona. For three days, she heard nothing.

Then, while returning to the rundown motel where she was waiting, Elvira saw a "man who was walking with his clothes all ripped, all beat up, full of blood, full of mud and dirt. ... It was my brother!"

He had been kidnapped and tortured by the coyotes he had paid. And he had a frantic warning.

"He ran and hugged me and says, 'Don't go. Don't cross. No, let's go back to the farm, but don't go. Don't 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. Before entering the water, they stripped off their clothes. After reaching the opposite banks, they ran in different directions. As she prepared to sprint after the group, the coyote directed her down another path, telling her that she would be less visible if she didn't follow the larger group. The coyote led her down an isolated trail. She asked him: "But why are you taking me this way?" His response was: "Don't you want to go to your husband?"

As they continued running, Elvira grew uneasy. They finally stopped. Elvira said a quick prayer to herself. The smuggler continued: "Look little lady, if you want to arrive with your old man, you have to cooperate." Elvira says that a word popped into her head that she didn't completely understand. As the smuggler inched closer, his intentions clear, she told him: "I have AIDS." The ruse worked. The man ran away.

"I thought, what could this be that I said? I've never told my husband [about] this. Never. Maybe because, I don't know ... I don't even like to remember it."



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.

Maria's Story: The Decisions at Work

Soon after crossing into the United States in 1998, Maria found herself planting tomatoes in Florida, the country's leading producer of fresh tomatoes. The 30-year-old Guatemalan with four children once worked cleaning hotels in Mexico, but she never worked as hard as she did in the tomato fields.

"I had some friends who said that in the North you earn good money," she says. "But I'm seeing that's not the case."

On her first 12-hour work day, "I cried because I didn't think I'd make it. Your head hurts because of the [pesticide] spray, your back hurts."

When working by the hour, Maria says she typically earns \$5.75. When working by contract—during harvest, for example—she earns 45 cents for every



32-pound bucket she fills with tomatoes. Racing to make as much money as possible, like many of the more than 33,000 farmworkers toiling in Florida's tomato fields, Maria runs back and forth, filling her bucket and dumping the load onto a nearby truck.

"You have to run to do 150 [buckets] to make your money for the day."

That is, when the bosses actually pay.

When not battling the heat, the physical demands and the persistent sexual harassment in the fields, Maria has had to worry if, at the end of a work week, she has given away her labor for nothing.

Of one boss, she says, "He doesn't let you go to the bathroom, and if you do, he yells at you."

After putting in two weeks of work, the boss told the workers there was no money to pay them.

Somewhere in America, someone probably paid the full price for the tomatoes Maria picked. But she received nothing. And there was nothing she could do.