

Sara

When Sara entered the U.S. in her early 20s, her main goal was to find work and help provide for her family back in Mexico. But she also had a youthful urge to travel. “I was really excited about seeing the United States because I heard a lot about how pretty it was,” she says.

A decade later, at 33, Sara wishes she had resisted the allure of her country’s richer neighbor. “Now that I’m here, I see things so differently.” Life in Mexico was hard, she says, but “even though I was poor, I was free.”

The crossing was difficult. She paid \$1,800 for the privilege of nearly losing her life in the Sonoran Desert. The journey began with 18 other immigrants. By the end, after five days in the desert, only a handful remained. “Many people got lost.”

Sara almost didn’t make it. She got tangled in barbed wire, and the group, pushed forward by the uncaring guides, began to leave her behind. At the last possible moment, a stranger turned back to free Sara.

Within a week of arriving in the U.S., Sara got a job at a poultry plant in North Carolina. Although prepared to work hard, she was shocked at the physical demands of her new job and the abusive and cruel treatment from the supervisors.

Working on the “disassembly line,” Sara would place skinned, whole chickens onto cones that sped by her. She regularly stood for eight hours at a time, sometimes 10, reaching up to fill the cones. It was hard to keep up.

“You’re at the pace of a machine. I felt like I was going to faint. The line was too fast.”

At other times, she would hang butchered chicken on the sharp points of hangers. “Many times your hands would get scratched with that point because they wouldn’t slow down the line.” On a few occasions, she cut chicken with dull scissors, her hands swelling as she struggled to cut through bone.

Unlike farmworkers who work in scorching heat, poultry workers have to fight near-freezing temperatures meant to preserve the meat.

“It was an extreme cold. You were white with cold. When you entered the area, you wore sweaters and shoes and everything. But it was very bad.”

Every day after her shift, Sara would drag her battered body home to the crowded apartment she shared and curl up on the floor, her body burning with pain.

“One time, I couldn’t close my hands at night

because they were so swollen. One day I went to the office and told them I couldn’t take it, that it felt like my bones were going to pop out.”

Her managers dismissed her concerns and sent her back to work.

The challenging environment — cold temperature and the dangerous industrial surroundings of sharp metal and fast-moving machines — was made worse by the unrelenting demands of the supervisors.

Her managers routinely yelled and cursed their employees, pushing them to meet impossible production quotas. They denied workers breaks to stretch their gnarled limbs or go to the bathroom.

One supervisor, in his rush to get Sara back to work, broke her wrist, she says. The man noticed her struggling to close a latch on a rusty, metal safety glove. He grabbed her hand and slammed the latch in place.

“He pressed down on the latch and I felt how the bones cracked apart,” she recalls. Her hand went limp with pain, but the supervisor yelled at Sara to get back to work. “I grabbed the chicken and it fell out of my hands because it hurt so much.” She did not report the incident because she did not believe anything could be done.

Sara intended to stay in the U.S. for just two years but has, instead, stayed a decade. She is caught in the cruelly self-perpetuating situation of being unable to be with her family in Mexico because she feels she has to remain in the United States to help support them.

“You suffer to come. Then once you’re here, you suffer some more.”



Poultry processing is one of the most dangerous occupations in America, killing 100 workers and injuring 300,000 each year.