

Moms miss kids left in homeland

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When Nubia Gonzalez immigrated to the United States from Nicaragua, she thought a few years of work would earn her enough money to be able to feed and educate the two children she left behind with her mother in Managua.

She never imagined the separation would last for 10 years.

In her Somerset apartment, Gonzalez surrounds herself with photos and keepsakes from her now grown children — Roger Aim-Karim, 19, and Gemma Rossina, 22. Every day apart from her kids is hard, said Gonzalez, who put her daughter through college with money earned in the United States. But for Gonzalez, and other area immigrants who have left children back home — many from South and Central America — Mother's Day is often an especially lonely day.

"Your children are your life," said Gonzalez, "and on Mother's Day, it's harder. I don't want anyone to say 'Happy Mother's Day' to me because my family isn't here. It makes me feel sad."

While many mothers will wake up today to breakfast in bed or red roses presented with a kiss and a hug, Gonzalez and others like her will take solace in a photo, a stuffed animal sent from abroad or a scratchy "I love you," declared over international phone lines. For these women, Mother's Day is a painful, yet proud, reminder of the sacrifice they made and continue to make for their children. Most are unable to visit because of financial hardship, their legal status, or both.

"I wanted to give them a future," Gonzalez said about her children. "Over there, only the people who have money can go to school; the poor can't."

A former administrator who left Nicaragua after the transnational company she worked for closed its offices, Gonzalez, a single mom, has worked here in a candle-making factory, for a company that affixes price tags on compact discs and now, cleaning offices.

"The first year for me it was very hard," she said. "I cried every day. Now I'm more comfortable. I see they've grown up, and they're a good girl and good boy." Gonzalez still suffers though with the guilt she feels over the morning she left. She didn't say goodbye to her son, she said, a fact Roger Aim-Karim hasn't let her forget.

"I knew if he was crying, I wouldn't go," Gonzalez said. "Now he says, 'You left me when I needed you most.' "

Nearby in New Brunswick, Mexican immigrant Maria Camero cares for two of her four children in a tiny, dark apartment. Camero had Jonathan Betancor, her 3-year-old chubby-cheeked son, with her new husband, who she met in New Jersey. Her daughter, Aracede Herrera, 20, agreed to join Camero in the United States.

Her sons, Elizar, 15, and Uriel, 12, live with Camero's ex-husband in Mexico. She hasn't seen the boys for three years. When she returned to her village in 2003 to bring them with her to New Jersey, they refused to come.

"Their father got it in their heads that I didn't love them anymore," Camero said, in Spanish. Camero immigrated here to earn money to send back home, \$150 every two weeks. "They said they thought I had abandoned them. It hurts me and depresses me, but I still love them," she said.

Jeffrey Vega, president of New Brunswick Tomorrow, which works with immigrant groups like the Mexican American Organization, said such separations are not uncommon. Vega, who is Peruvian, said his own mother sent him to live with family in Peru while she worked in a New Jersey factory.

"It's unfortunate that surviving economically means having to make the decision to have children away from their mother," Vega said. "But it's an option that's guided by an economic reality."

In past years, women migrating from Central and South America have come here to join husbands who came to this country to work. In the last few decades, however, large numbers of women — many of them single moms — have traveled to the United States to earn money to support children left back home with grandmothers or aunts.

Days before Mother's Day this year, in their respective apartments, Camero and Gonzalez prepared for Sunday as they recalled past gifts they received from their children.

Camero prepped a plastic tub full of chile peppers, an ingredient in the Mother's Day meal she planned to cook — carne enchilada and chorizo. Aracede, returning to their New Brunswick home from her job at a local factory, sat at the kitchen table to wolf down dinner before her GED class. She's unhappy here, she said, and wants to return to Mexico. Camero said she hopes her boys will call her on Mother's Day, even though they're still mad.

In Somerset, Gonzalez dug through a pile of past Mother's Day gifts spread out on her sofa. She affectionately calls Roger Aim-Karim "mi pollito," my little chicken. One year, he sent a tiny clear plastic egg with a yellow ceramic chicken inside. To remember him by, he said. Gemma Rossina sent a pink and purple pastel card signed "su beba," your baby.

"They always say, 'I love you, I need you,' " Gonzalez said about her children's holiday wishes. "I have a lot of stuff for Mother's Day," she said, scanning the pile, "but what I really want is to see my children again."

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