

WHAT REMITTANCES CAN'T BUY: THE SOCIAL COSTS OF MIGRATION AND
TRANSNATIONAL GOSSIP ON WOMEN IN JACALTENANGO, GUATEMALA

by

Jocelyn Sabbagh

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Wilkes Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

with a Concentration in Political Science and Latin American Studies

Wilkes Honors College of

Florida Atlantic University

Jupiter, Florida

May 2007

WHAT REMITTANCES CAN'T BUY: THE SOCIAL COSTS OF MIGRATION AND
TRANSNATIONAL GOSSIP ON WOMEN IN JACALTENANGO, GUATEMALA

by
Jocelyn Sabbagh

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisors, Dr. Timothy J. Steigenga and Dr. Rachel Corr, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Timothy J. Steigenga

Dr. Rachel Corr

Dean, Wilkes Honors College

Date

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my professor and advisor Dr. Timothy Steigenga, who not only served as my mentor for this thesis but also inspired and encouraged me throughout my academic career. I would also like to thank Dr. Rachel Corr for the care with which she reviewed this thesis. Many thanks to Jeremy, my family and friends for enduring this process with me, always offering love, support and insightful conversations.

ABSTRACT

Author: Jocelyn Sabbagh

Title: What Remittances Can't Buy: The Social Costs of Migration and Transnational Gossip on Women in Jacaltenango, Guatemala

Institution: Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Timothy J. Steigenga
Dr. Rachel Corr

Degree: Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

Concentrations: Political Science
Latin American Studies

Year: 2007

The academic debate on gender and migration has missed some of the key factors that impact women's lives and communities of origin. Interviews conducted in Jacaltenango, a Mayan sending community in Guatemala, suggest that while the migration of a spouse does bring substantial financial benefits there are significant individual and social costs that result from migration. More importantly, the interviews uncovered the crucial impact of transnational gossip on women's lives, a feature that has been absent in previous academic treatments of gender and migration. Transnational gossip has exacerbated the negative effects of migration for women in migrant-sending locations, pushing women to stay in the "private sphere" and serving as a form of social control that keeps women from actively participating in their communities. For many women, long periods of time living apart from their spouses combined with fears about transnational gossip have brought severe loneliness, anxiety, health problems and even seclusion. This phenomenon is helping define the contemporary social structures of Jacaltenango, and represents one of the most important effects of migration in terms of the lived reality of spouses and families of the predominantly male immigrants who leave Mayan communities in Guatemala to seek work in the United States.

To my family

CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
	a. Guatemalan Migration to the United States	3
	b. Migration and Remittances	4
	c. Women, Gender, and Migration	6
II.	Impacts of Migration in the Sending Community	8
	a. Migration Trends: Who Migrates and Who Stays?	8
	b. How Does Migration Affect Women Who Stay in Sending Communities?	11
III.	Case Study: Women in Jacaltenango	19
	a. Brief Introduction to the Case Study	19
	b. Limitations and Other Factors to be Considered	20
	c. Patriarchy in Guatemala	22
	d. Jacaltenango: History and Background	23
	e. From Jacaltenango to Jupiter: Close Links and Transnational Gossip	25
IV.	The Voices of Jacalteco Women: Insights from the Interviews	26
	a. Transnational Gossip	28
	b. Health	31
	c. Women in the Private Sphere – Money, Authority, and Independence ...	32
	d. Women in the Public Sphere: Work, Religious Participation and Community Involvement	36
	e. Recommendations to a Close Friend or Family Member	41
V.	Conclusions	43

I. Introduction

My husband went to the U.S. six years ago. My son does not really remember him. The last time he saw his father my son was a little over a year old, now he is seven. Having my husband in the United States has brought some good things, but it has also brought some negative things to our lives. My son and I live by ourselves. We get very lonely. My son does not have a father figure and I constantly feel very lonesome. As years have gone by, those feelings have continued to accumulate... As a woman, it has really affected my life. Being alone is very difficult, especially because people around you start rejecting you... I go to a doctor that helps me through my problems. My doctor tells me in confidence that many women in my situation are going through the same psychological and physical illnesses that I am...

- Carmen, Jacaltenango 2006

Carmen's account highlights the human costs of migration and how migration impacts the lives of women who stay in sending communities while their husbands are abroad. The phenomenon of migration has been the subject of many recent studies conducted by large multinational organizations such as the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and numerous academics.¹ The studies conducted by these organizations and academics concentrate, for the most part, on analyzing quantitative data collected under macro categories such as international remittances and development, migration and poverty reduction and gendered migration. In contrast, this thesis seeks to fill a gap in migration studies by exploring the personal stories of twelve women who live in Jacaltenango, Huehuetenango while their husbands live and work in the United States. The stories of these women put a human face on the day-to-day impacts of migration and remind us of the multiple and frequently high human costs of international migration.

¹ Examples include, Susan Forbes Martin (2003), Victoria Lawson (1998), Sarah Gammage (2003), Mariano Sana (2003), Carlota Ramirez, Mar Garcia Dominguez, Julia Miguez Morais (2005), Peggy Levitt(2001), Timothy Steigenga (Forthcoming 2008), Maria Aysa and Douglas Massey (2004), Jacobo Dardón Sosa (2004).

Women in Jacaltenango, a rural and indigenous community in the highlands of western Guatemala, explained that although migration brings substantial economic benefits, their spouses' absence has changed their lives significantly. The transnational gossip that developed when their husbands migrated deeply affects their daily reality and pushes them to stay within the private sphere of their households. They refrain from participating in community events and the workforce because they fear they will be subject to gossip that can potentially affect their relationships with their distant husbands. Women whose husbands are abroad are often put under the critical eye of their community, friends and family. They are quickly labeled with a similar stigma that single mothers have in Guatemala and are often perceived to be unfaithful, mispending hard-earned remittances and unable to raise their children properly. They often feel secluded, lonely, and constantly anxious about their reputation. This in turn, is causing mental and physical illnesses, such as high blood pressure, depression, anxiety and hair loss among women whose husbands are abroad. The transnational gossip that results from migration is serving as a form of social control in Jacaltenango that greatly impacts women's public involvement and their personal lives.

This study aims to provide useful insights on how migration affects gender relations and women's lives. The paper is divided in two main parts. The first part reviews the existing literature that debates how migration and remittances affect gender roles. This section also addresses the questions of who is migrating and why; how migration affects people who stay in sending communities; and in particular, what the gendered patterns of migration mean to the daily lives of women who stay in sending communities. The second part takes a closer look at the cases of twelve Jacalteco women

in an effort to answer more concretely questions about the impact that migration has on gender roles and women in communities that are sending large portions of their populations abroad. Drawing on the case study of Jacaltenango this study demonstrates how migration brings about transnational gossip which, in turn, impacts women's health, their role in the work force, in their households, and in the public sphere.

a. Guatemalan Migration to the United States

In recent years, the flux of Guatemalan migrants to the United States has grown so exponentially that this migratory pattern has become part of the daily lives of households all over Guatemala. As pointed out by Guatemalan scholar, Jacobo Dardón Sosa (2004), Guatemalans have been migrating to the United States for over 50 years (141). However, it was not until recently that such event became a social and economic phenomenon for the whole nation. Dardón Sosa explains that during the 1960s and 1970s, international migration was more common among urban and middle class Guatemalans. Unlike the trend in the 60s and 70s, during the 1980s and 1990s, most migrants came from poor, rural backgrounds (141). The migratory trend was highly impacted by the Guatemalan civil war. The economic difficulties and the social repression that resulted from this conflict pushed many indigenous, rural and lower class Guatemalans out of the country.

Silvia Irene Palma, Carol Girón Solórzano and Timothy Steigenga (2007), clearly describe the migratory pattern of Guatemalans to Florida. Approximately 28,650 Guatemalans live in Florida, out of which approximately 6,576 live in Palm Beach County (171). Starting in the late 70s, Mayan refugees started migrating to Florida to

seek political asylum. During the mid 80s the refugees' families began migrating to Florida to reunite with the original refugee. After the civil war came to an end, a new wave of rural Mayan workers emerged (172). The civil war ended with the Peace Accords in 1996; yet, the economic aftermath of the internal war continued to provoke many more individuals to migrate north. Migrants began to move away from their communities searching for better paying jobs, and saw migration as a strategy to improve their livelihoods (Dardón Sosa, 141). By 2000, approximately ten percent of the Guatemalan population was living in the United States and about four million Guatemalans (thirty percent of the population) received monetary support from those who lived abroad (IOM 4).

b. Migration and Remittances

Remittances – money sent to communities of origin by migrants - have been a widely studied aspect of migration. Many studies have concentrated on migrant remittances because of their potential economic impact in countries of origin and destination. As the Development Prospects Group (DECPG) at the World Bank point out in their study “Global Economic Prospects: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration” (2006), international remittances are expected to reach \$167 billion by the end of 2005, more than twice the size of international aid flows (88). The international money transfer has the potential of reducing the severity of poverty and promoting development in low-income countries around the world. In Guatemala, for example, remittances have noticeably reduced the depth and severity of poverty (DECPG 121).

The World Bank's DECPG forecasts that remittance flows will continue to grow and will continue to improve developing countries' welfare both in macro and micro-dimensions.

In 2003, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) undertook a National Survey on Family Remittances in Guatemala. The survey calculated the impact of remittances all over Guatemala. The IOM recorded that nearly two billion dollars would be injected into the country through remittances. According to a special news report in *Prensa Libre* (Guatemala's leading newspaper) that amount of money would position remittances only behind coffee exports in the national revenue. The IOM also found that the total number of female headed households that receive remittances in Guatemala (61.2 percent) is higher than the total number of male headed households that receive remittances (38.8 percent). That means that females, who are the principal recipients for remittances in most regions of Guatemala, are receiving over sixty percent of an increasingly influential sector of the Guatemalan economy. New capital in Guatemala can lead to new investments. New investments could potentially mean an increased welfare in communities and an overall reduction in the national poverty. These figures, and the role women are playing in the current economy, serve as the backdrop and setting for this study.

The IOM's study suggests that women are receiving a large portion of the remittances being sent to Guatemala. Does this setting mean that women have an increased influence in the Guatemalan economy? Is migration causing women to become more autonomous and powerful in a patriarchal society? Although these questions are ambitious, the case study of Jacaltenango brings forth some critical insights that help

begin to shed light on the impacts that migration and remittances has on gender roles in Guatemala.

c. Women, Gender and Migration

There is a limited existing body of scholarship that analyzes the implications migration has on gender and vice versa. Sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003) gives a comprehensive account of the history of academic studies on gender and immigration in her volume *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*. Hondagneu-Sotelo explains that the first stage of feminist research on immigration emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. She labels this early stage of research as “women and migration” because its main objective was to bring women into the academic treatment of migration. Before this wave of research (influenced by the second-wave feminist movement which advocated for the rights of women), key studies on immigration relied exclusively on survey or interview responses from men. This stage of research aimed to deal with the exclusion of women from migration studies. It often focused on the accounts of migrant women exclusively and not as part of a wider phenomenon.

The second stage emerged during the 1980s and 1990s and focused mainly on how migration reshaped new systems of gender relations for women and men. Hondagneu-Sotelo labels this second stage as “gender and migration” and explains that this research drew attention to how migration restrained and facilitated men’s lives and also how gender relations became more egalitarian through the process of migration. The third stage is now materializing. As Hondagneu-Sotelo puts it, the current research is

highlighting the ways in which “gender organizes a number of immigrant practices, beliefs, and institutions” (9). The case study of Jacaltenango touches upon the main objectives of all three waves. It brings attention to women in sending communities who have seldom been included in immigration scholarship. It analyzes how migration affects gender relations and women’s roles. It delves into how gender has influenced immigrant practices; particularly, the practice of transnational gossip. Furthermore, this study analyzes how such practices help define gender roles and the social structure in sending communities.

Many researchers have pointed out the importance of gender in understanding the phenomenon of migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Lawson 1998; Forbes Martin 2003; Carter 2004). Yet, few have focused their studies on how migration specifically affects the position and role of women who stay in the sending communities. In fact, many of the researchers studying the issue highlight the need for more studies to consider such impacts of migration. According to contemporary researchers such a study is timely; as Victoria Lawson (1998) puts it, “migration theory will be significantly enriched through attention to feminist research on the inner workings of migrant households” (43). This study aims to address this gap by considering how gender roles and women have been impacted by the increasing number of males leaving their households in Jacaltenango, Guatemala.

II. Impacts of Migration in the Sending Community

a. Migration Trends: Who migrates and Who stays?

For a number of reasons, many of which are tied with gender relations, it is more common for men to migrate from Jacaltenango, Guatemala. First, sending a family member abroad (either legally or illegally) is costly. Therefore, generally families can initially only afford for one person to migrate as opposed to a whole family. Costs for legal and illegal migration have rocketed since the 2001 September 11th attacks in the United States when stricter Homeland Security measures were implemented (Waslin 3). The process to obtain legal paperwork for entering the U.S. and to travel with legal documents has become more complicated, lengthier, and more expensive. For example, in the case of legal immigrants Michele Waslin (2003) notes that some permanent residents coming from Mexico were “denied entry into the country because they did not have enough money in their possession to warrant their entry” (3). Costs for illegal immigration have also increased. Wayne Cornelius (2001), Director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies in the University of California at San Diego explains that the attempts to reduce illegal immigration to the United States has pushed unauthorized migrants to cross the border through more hazardous areas, raising fees charged by people-smugglers. *Coyotes* (people who get paid to smuggle migrants across the borders) charge more for their services because border security has become stricter and in turn, their jobs have become more dangerous. Coyotes make up for the risks they are taking by charging a larger sum of money (Cornelius 661).

The price many migrants from Jacaltenango pay to cross the border ranges around \$5,500 (Palma et.al. 181). My respondents claimed that their families had paid anywhere from \$5,000 to \$10,000 for migration and were still paying off debt. Many families in Jacaltenango are living in poverty or extreme poverty and thus, coming up with large sums of money to pay coyotes is very difficult and families often incur debt to afford the costs of migration. The high costs that go along with migrating explain why Jacalteco families carefully choose how many and which members migrate.

Second, as border security becomes tougher (in both Mexico and the United States) and undocumented migrating becomes highly dangerous and risky, fewer Jacalteco women tend to migrate. According to Timothy Steigenga (2007), the current migration trend from Jacaltenango is made up mainly by male (about 70 percent), young (between 15-35 years old), rural Mayan workers. The United States implemented the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 which was intended to deter illegal immigrants from crossing the border, so, a higher budget was allotted to the INS (now called the USCIS) and to border enforcement. The border security was tightened. Following IRCA, in 1996, the U.S. implemented the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which increased penalties on smugglers and illegal migrants, and mandated a doubling of the Border Patrol by 2001 (Cornelius 661). More recently, the U.S. implemented the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act which further increased border security enforcement. In addition to formal governmental border security, local Americans have formed vigilante groups such as the Minuteman Project, who take border security into their own hands.²

² The official Minuteman Project Website: www.minutemanproject.com

As border security and enforcement has heightened, the risks of crossing the border without documents have become even more dire. Not only are migrants risking temporary detainment and deportation, but they are risking their lives. In the study, “Death at the Border,” Karl Eschbach et. al. (1999) record more than 1,600 possible migrant fatalities between 1993 and 1997, and explain that more deaths might have gone unrecorded in official reports. In current news we also see many migrants being detained and/or sent back to their home countries. Furthermore, women face specific risks such as rapes and sex trafficking. The conditions for immigration are highly risky and dangerous. In a patriarchal society, such as Jacaltenango, men are usually viewed as the stronger and physically powerful of both genders, and thus, they are perceived to be most fit to endure and overcome the obstacles placed by stringent border security measures (Lawson 46).

Third, it is easier for men to mobilize once they have arrived to their community of destination because they have closer ties to their kin and have easier access to community networks that are created transnationally (Garrard-Burnett 8, Ramírez et.al. 34). Networks are very important for first-time immigrants because they help defray the costs of obtaining information about the trip, the receiving community, and help immigrants settle once they arrive at their destination (Ramírez et.al. 10). As Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2000) explains, in Mayan communities men have the privilege and responsibility of holding places in the hierarchies of kinship (7).³ So, based on tradition, it is easier for men than for women to enter networks because women lose their status in the absence of their husband or father (Garrard-Burnett 8). The patriarchal system, in which males are the authority of a family, facilitates male strategic networking.

³ The term Mayan refers to the indigenous peoples of Guatemala, in this study it is used interchangeably with the term indigenous.

Finally, it is predetermined in Jacalteco society that women's responsibilities and duties exist mostly within the house; such as, care-taking and nursing. As Carol Smith (1995) points out, Mayan women are expected to marry within their communities and bear as many children as possible. It is also a woman's responsibility to teach her children Mayan values. Mayan women are expected to behave modestly, contrary to the perceived behavior of ladino women in Guatemala (738).⁴ This important domestic role makes it much more difficult for women to leave their families and responsibilities behind. In recent years women have gradually become active participants in the migration phenomenon; however, for the above mentioned reasons, the vast majority of Mayan migrants are still male.

b. How Does Migration Affect Women Who Stay in the Sending Community?

Different studies have generated opposing views on the effects of migration and remittances on gender roles. On one hand, some researchers and newspaper reports have pointed out that migration and remittances have increased female decision-making and power within the household (Lawson 1998; Gammage 2003; Suárez and Zapata 2003; Salazar 2003). On the other hand, some recent studies have shown that migration in fact increases women's dependence and subordination (Forbes Martin 2004; Ramírez et. al. 2005).

The researchers that support the former view argue that the absence of men from the household alters women's sense of power within the household (Lawson 46). Women

⁴ The term Ladino is used fairly loosely in Guatemala, but in general it is used to describe someone who is not indigenous or Mayan.

receive remittances and this gives them the physical power over the administration of the money. Not only are women in charge of distributing the money to buy consumer goods, but they also take part in allocating money into larger investment projects, whether in family projects or community projects (Suárez and Zapata 2). In this sense, women have acquired a special and important role in the development of the local Guatemalan economy.

Ana Salazar (2003) reports a study case of México that explores the effects of migration on women. She explains that migrants have left behind “886 towns of women” as stated by the project “Native Migrants” conducted by the Colegio Mexiquense (1). Women in these towns are not only in charge of raising their children, but also of cultivating whatever little land they have to cover additional costs that remittances do not cover. Although women in these towns have more responsibilities, at the same time, they have become more independent and self-sufficient. María Aysa and Douglas Massey (2004) explain that women are often responsible for generating an income while the migrant travels, settles, and collects enough money to pay for any debts (i.e. to the *coyote*, or to people that lent money to afford the migration cost). Their study also points out that the degree of independence from remittances varies depending on the local economic opportunities. In other words, female autonomy does not solely depend on migration, but also on job availability and accessibility. In the case of the towns investigated by the Colegio Mexiquense, women were responsible for covering extra expenses that remittances did not fully cover. Women in those towns became more active in the work force and have created matrifocal communities.

Some researchers claim that the extended absence of men increases the empowerment of women since men miss out on the day to day decision making. Victoria Lawson (1998) explains that with the absence of men from the household, women secure more room to be in control of the household and identify themselves as “*mujer fuerte*” (strong woman) (46). Monetary remittances play a very important role in the improvement of women’s economic circumstances; which in consequence, potentially enables women to move more freely in society and possibly to be respected more among their communities.

Sarah Gammage (2003) presents the case of sending communities in El Salvador and concludes that households with migrants abroad are more likely to be female-headed (12). Gammage explains that “it may be that the welfare of households with migrants abroad is better not just because of access to remittance income but also because migration has changed preferences and decision-making authority in the household” (8). According to Gammage’s study of El Salvador, monetary remittances not only alleviates poverty, they also transfer authority within the household. Households with migrants in El Salvador are more likely to be *de jure* female headed in both urban and rural areas (9).

In addition to monetary remittances, migration creates a flow of social remittances (Ramírez, et al.11, Levitt 927). As Peggy Levitt (1998) explains social remittances are ideas, thoughts, feelings, and values that migrants learn abroad and bring back into their original community (927). Social remittances are communicated when immigrants visit their communities, or contact their communities over the phone, letters, videos, etc. For example, gender equality or educational practices are views that immigrants might transmit to their communities and such views can have an important influence on gender

relations and may deconstruct preconceived notions of gender roles. Levitt describes that notions of gender identity are revised with migration, and migrants often modify their ideas about women's roles and transmit new ideas back to their communities of origin (933). In other words, normative social remittances hold the potential of affecting the social structure and gender roles in sending communities.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some studies conclude that migration does not alter women's roles in the sending communities and in fact, the separation of families sometimes increases women's subordination to men. For example, Carlota Ramírez, Mar García Domínguez, and Julia Míguez Morais (2003) argue that,

Given that women are largely excluded from formal economic processes, and when they do participate in formal economic processes, they do so in traditionally feminized sectors...it is very probable that productive investments financed through remittances benefit to a large degree the men in the household (33).

In other words, women are often excluded from work opportunities and networks of information and therefore, are not gaining as much independence as suggested by other studies. Ramírez et.al. also argue that remittances cause dependence and discourage the search for other income-generating activities (16). The study emphasizes that there is a high probability that women may become dependent and completely reliant on remittances. This hints at the possibly heightened dependency of women on men and highlights the dangers of completely relying on remittances. For instance, if there is a crisis in the US economy, or something happens to the household member abroad, it would be harder (if not impossible) to transfer remittances and provide much needed monetary support to the families who remained in the sending communities. Dependence is also risky for the family who stays in the sending community because as Susan Forbes

Martin (2003) notes, there is a possibility that over time the migrant will get settled in the new community and lose contact with the sending community, reducing the amount of remittances sent back (7). That is why family loyalty, a strong sense of altruism, and an implicit contractual arrangement between the family at home and the migrant are so important (Sana 2003, 3).

Forbes Martin brings forward a very interesting observation that exposes how migration can actually amplify male domination over women who stay behind. Forbes Martin explains that,

Immigrant men often feel neglected and disappointed, which sometimes brings out patriarchal habits and efforts to re-establish traditional roles – even by force if necessary. In a situation where men are unsure of themselves, they often become skeptical about their wives. Their own feelings of inferiority can lead to their doubting the love and trustworthiness of their wives. When men mistrust their wives, they may restrict them and try to control them in an effort to boost their egos (29).

The difficulties and disappointment experienced by men in the receiving community can result in an increased need to control and dominate women who remained at home. In Anya Canache's (2003) interviews of Guatemalan migrants living in Jupiter, Florida, we can observe that men often feel unsure of how women will spend their hard-earned money and this mistrust may perhaps beget a need to become more controlling of them. For example, Canache's interviewees explain that many women think it is easy to make money in the U.S. so they take the money for granted. They describe that "the women will throw lavish parties and invite everyone they know, just for reasons of prestige" (Canache 50). Timothy Steigenga (2008) highlights similar reactions from immigrants in Jupiter. Steigenga explains that immigrants reported "discipline problems with children whose homes lack male authority figures, spouses who misuse remittances, and increases

in alcohol abuse among women and children” (27). These views give us an insight into the possible mistrust that arises between partners that could potentially further the need for control and consequently the patriarchal hierarchy in Guatemala.

Additionally, some researchers emphasize that even though women are indeed the recipients of monetary remittances, they only spend the money exactly how the migrant abroad tells them to. Even if women are physically in control of the money, men are still making administrative decisions and controlling the large sums of money. Some argue that perhaps women may sometimes have decision-making power over the “small cash” that goes toward consumer goods such as food, clothes, etc., but men are in charge of administering the “investment money” (Herrera López quoted by Vallejo Mora, 2005).

Even if women become more independent inside the household, Kavita Datta and Cathy McIlwaine (2000) explain that women who head households in Guatemala remain subject to societal disapproval and marginalization. Drawing from the cases of Guatemala and Botswana, Datta and McIlwaine focus on society’s perceptions of women heads of household. Guatemalans tend to have negative opinions about female heads of households. Datta and McIlwaine’s study describes that disapproval of women headed households in Guatemala is often associated with the notion that it is harmful to children. In their study, many Guatemalans suggested that “when single mothers had to go out to work, children were left behind to fend for themselves, often turning to delinquency, drug use, and / or gang activity” (44). This “inability” of women to bring up their children uprightly adds to the social stigma associated with female headed households. Additionally, elderly men in Guatemala often associated the single-mother status (head of household) with her sexual promiscuity. For example, the authors cite an indigenous man

who explains that “young women are stupid because they let the men use them, and they use them like dogs” (43). According to this man’s point of view, single mothers are women who were seduced and impregnated by men who then left them alone to raise their child. This further augments the ‘immoral’ and ‘illegitimate’ stigma of female led households in the minds of many Guatemalans. This indicates that society still perceives female led houses as an anomaly, and this limits the female scope of power within their own communities.

Garrard-Burnett also explains that women who were left as de facto heads of their households after the 36-year civil war in Guatemala were not able to fully participate in their communities (7). The civil war proved to be disastrous in multiple ways. During the conflict most freedoms were taken away from the civilian population, the executive branch and the military overtook most of the governmental power, over 500,000 people died or were disappeared, and entire villages were eliminated. During this tragic period, thousands of women were widowed or left behind by their displaced husbands, fathers, and/or sons. This is how many women became de facto household leaders. Nevertheless, Garrard-Burnett explains that when the husband was absent, women lost their status in the local hierarchies of kinship (8). Even if women were in charge in the private sphere of their households, it was particularly difficult for them to prosper in a patriarchal society. Additionally, even though many females became leaders of their households during the civil war, once husbands returned home (for those that had been displaced) wives were again subordinated by their husbands (Garrard-Burnett 8).

With a constantly increasing number of migrants leaving Guatemala, many women are again being left behind as heads of their homes. Except this time around, their

status is not the result of a systematic governmental repression. Instead, women find themselves in that situation because of a family strategy to prosper economically. Women become de facto heads of household and “temporary single mothers” when their husbands migrate; with this status comes the social stigma of single mothers discussed by Datta and McIlwaine (2000).

The impacts of migration on gender roles are highly debated by academics. One side of the debate argues that when males migrate from a patriarchal society, females that stay behind gain some control within their household. Observers that support this side of the debate argue that in the absence of men, women gain decision-making power within the household and also gain control over money (in both consumer spending and larger investments). These studies argue that higher incomes due to remittances give women a new social status that provides them with social mobility and power within their communities. The other side of the debate argues the opposite – migration does not give women more control, autonomy or power. Studies that align with this side of the debate argue that women with migrants working abroad tend to become very dependent on remittances, which by extension means that they become very dependent on their husbands. Studies that support this side of the debate argue that even if women had physical control over money it does not mean they have the autonomy to decide how to spend it.

This study addresses this debate by bringing the voices of the women themselves into the dialogue. By listening to their voices, we find that both sides of the debate have some basis in the lived reality of women with partners/spouses who have migrated. In some cases migration translates into more female autonomy, and in other cases migration

translates into no change or increased dependence on the male. In fact, the debate holds true even in individual cases. That is, an individual woman might gain command of some areas of her life while losing autonomy in others. By more carefully defining what we mean by “autonomy” and viewing the lived experience of women whose family members have migrated we gain a more nuanced and accurate picture of the effects of migration for women in sending communities.

III. Case Study: Women in Jacaltenango

a. Brief Introduction to the Case Study

The immediate goal of this study is to understand how migration affects gender roles in Jacaltenango, a rural city in the highlands of Guatemala. Data for this study is based on the individual and group qualitative interviews I conducted in Jacaltenango in June 2006⁵. Qualitative interviews enabled me to gather extensive, meaningful, and personal information to understand the gendered impacts of migration in the sending community. Although it is clear that each interviewee is unique and should not be used as the basis for strict generalizations, the qualitative interviews yielded various useful insights that have been overlooked in larger quantitative and even qualitative studies.

I selected Jacaltenango as the case study for this research because I have been working closely with the immigrant community in Jupiter, Florida for the past three years and there is a direct transnational link between Jupiter and Jacaltenango. My experience with the immigrant community in Jupiter gave me a two-fold advantage: first, I was very

⁵ The names of interviewees were changed to protect their anonymity.

acquainted with the history, context, and perspective of the migrants who had left Guatemala, and second, I already had a number of contacts in Jacaltenango. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and tape recorded. I conducted all interviews in the respondent's place and time of choice. All of my interviews were conducted privately and individually in the interviewee's house (with the exception of the group interview I conducted with 5 women). This set up helped respondents feel at ease and comfortable to give open and unhurried responses.

b. Limitations and Other Factors to be Considered

In order to evaluate how migration impacts women's roles in Guatemala we must also take into consideration the context in which these perceived changes in women's status and gender relations are taking place. Migration is indeed a factor that influences gender relations in Guatemala, but many other factors are involved. As previous studies have established, gender relations are impacted by variables such as levels of education; ethnicity; religion; union status; opportunities available in the cash economy; and crop production prevalence in the community (Carter 2004, 635-7). Sometimes women's roles vary, but that does not necessarily mean that it is due solely to the migration phenomenon. The change in gender relations might be due to one or a combination of the other factors mentioned above. Moreover, gender role changes might sometimes depend on particular issues; that is, there might be more male dominance in one issue as compared to another.

For example, Marion Carter (2004) explains that women in Guatemala with higher education levels tended to be less dependent on their husbands than women with

little or no education at all. Carter also notes that ethnicity is a factor of gender relations in Guatemala. Before accelerated cultural and economic changes took place in Guatemala, the Mayan sectors tended to be less patriarchal than the Ladinos or white population of the country. However, her study shows that indigenous women now reported more husband dominance than ladino women.

Religious affiliation also affects gender relations in Guatemala. Carter points out that many researchers refer to the increasing Evangelical affiliation as “the reformation of *machismo*.” Like Sonia Montecinos (2003) describes, with the increase in Evangelical dispersion, women have taken a more co-operative and complementary role in their families. Women can use the Biblical interpretations of “equality” to offset male domination. Yet, Carter’s study shows that the role of Evangelical women was not much different than the role of Catholic women in their households. Furthermore, Steigenga (2008) points out that evangelical immigrants in Jupiter had “significantly fewer connections to home villages and less interest in returning to Guatemala” than Catholics (31). The role of Evangelism in “the reformation of *machismo*” may, therefore, not be as clear in migrant households as other researchers suggest.

According to Carter’s findings, formal marriages, unlike consensual unions, give more bargaining power to women. Also, women who had their own sources of income experienced less male dominance in the household than did women with no personal involvement in the cash economy. On the other hand, women living in an agricultural setting reported higher levels of husband authority. Women living in communities with a spread crop production industry were less likely to handle and administer money than women who had their own source of income.

Carter also argues that husbands' dominance depends on different issues. For example, a husband may be adamant about deciding which medicine should be bought, but the wife might be the one in charge of deciding which food is bought and when. In some issues and circumstances migration, might have very positive effect on the progress of gender equality and in other issues there might be no change at all.

In this study most of these factors were kept constant. All interviewed women were indigenous, married, and they all lived in the same rural and agricultural community.⁶ Education was a factor that did vary, and as Carter suggests, interviewed women with higher educations reported more autonomy than women with less education. Religion was also a factor that varied to some extent, most women self identified as Catholic and one woman self-identified as Jehovah's Witness. In this study, however, the difference in religion did not clearly affect a women's autonomy or dependence. Thus, with the exception of education, the key factors hypothesized to impact gender relations are constant across cases.

c. Patriarchy in Guatemala

Guatemalan society in general, including Mayan sectors, tends to be highly patriarchal (Garrard-Burnett 7). Colonial legacies of social structure and gender relations are still visible in Guatemala. As many historians have recorded, in colonial Guatemala and Latin America males headed their families and were in control of finances (Bradford

⁶ I had the opportunity of sitting through several interviews conducted by Silvia Irene Palma and Carol Girón during the summer of 2006 that asked similar questions to *ladino* women from Llano Grande, Quiche. Llano Grande is a village in Quiche, also in northwestern Guatemala. Like women in Jacaltenango, the interviewees recognize the positive economic development that resulted from the influx of remittances and explain that migration often affected their family relationships. Mothers/wives of migrants also expressed often feeling alone, and reported tensions and jealousy in the community. Women in Llano Grande explained that it is common for women to handle remittances and to decide how it is spent.

Burns, Charlip 51). Mayan perceptions of gender roles are a combination of Mayan traditions and Mayan interaction with Spaniards during the colonial period. Mayan women tend to be freer than other Guatemalan women because they often have their own sources of income and are able to redress the community in case they are mistreated by their husbands. Nevertheless, there are still prevailing social norms and customs that reflect the dominant patriarchal system present in Mayan communities such as Jacaltenango and all over Guatemala. As Carter suggests, present-day Mayan women tend to report more male dominance than ladino women in Guatemala.

In the 1930s Oliver LaFarge completed a comprehensive ethnography of Jacaltenango, and his findings draw attention to the presence of the patriarchal system in the Jacalteco community. LaFarge (1997) observed that when Jacalteco women were “outside” they behaved with great modesty and did not take part in conversations; yet, when they were inside their household women seemed less subjugated. LaFarge notes that the father tends to be the ‘jefe’ (Spanish for boss) and head of the family (79). Although culture and laws have changed since the colonial period and LaFarge’s ethnography, the power relations within the contemporary Jacalteco household are still highly influenced by traditional notions of gender roles and behaviors.

d. Jacaltenango: History and Background

Jacaltenango is located in Huehuetenango, in the northwest highlands of Guatemala. Jacaltenango has a subtropical temperate climate. The main economic activity in Jacaltenango is agriculture, with corn, beans, coffee, citric fruit, avocado, and other fruits as its main crops. In 1994 the Central American Foundation for Development

(FUNCEDE) of Guatemala gathered exhaustive statistics on Jacaltenango and recounted the history of Jacaltenango from the early 16th century⁷. In 1994, FUNCEDE reported that 99% of the population was indigenous, the majority self-identified as Jacalteco (12). Jacalteco is the local ethnicity and language, although Spanish is also spoken by many. There are only two roads that reach Jacaltenango, both are part concrete and part dirt. In 1993 86% of the households reported that they did not have electric energy, 53% reported that they did not have latrines. The predominant household is a traditional ranch built out of adobe, sometimes wood, dirt floors, with little or no internal divisions. Many live under the poverty line; that is, with less than US\$1 per day. Although the latest statistics available were gathered in 1994, they are insightful and give a general overview of Jacaltenango. Recently, Jacaltenango's infrastructure has been improving, concrete roads, block houses are being built and the influx of remittances is stimulating the local economy; but overall Jacaltenango continues to be an agricultural-based, rural and indigenous territory typical of many of the highland communities of Guatemala.

Oliver La Farge's ethnography describes in detail women's work and men's work in Jacaltenango. La Farge explained that women generally stayed at home taking care of the daily household chores and their children. Jacalteco women also weaved and made pottery. Occasionally they helped with agricultural work or sold merchandise in the local "mercados" (markets). But for the most part, women in Jacaltenango stayed at home to

⁷ FUNCEDE records that in 1528, Xacaltenango (now Jacaltenango) was taken over by the conquistador and encomendero Gonzalo de Ovalle. In 1549 one of Gonzalo de Ovalle's sons was heir to the encomienda of Jacaltenango. Among the tributes paid to the Spanish encomenderos were large sums of corn, beans, wheat, cotton, cloth, hens, salt, honey, spices and personal services. By the late 1540's Dominican missionaries had already started settling in Jacaltenango and had been bringing some indigenous people to live in their "reductions" or "missions." In 1770 archbishop Pedro Cortes y Larraz documented that there had been several diseases that decimated the Jacalteco population from around 260,000 in 1520 to approximately 16,000 in 1680. Independence from the Spanish was declared September 27, 1821.

cook, clean, and to raise her children (45). Men, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with their agricultural work and with providing food for their family. La Farge points out that even though most men were dedicated to cultivating crops, Jacalteco men were sometimes carpenters or basket weavers, and a few owned small businesses (59). La Farge's ethnography describes a very traditional setting in which gendered individual roles within families are well defined and respected.

For decades Jacaltecos have been migrating in search of jobs. Formerly, Jacaltecos would stay within Guatemala and travel south, some would travel into Mexico and a few would travel to the United States. Municipal authorities reported that in 1994 there was a migratory flux of about 40 percent of the Jacalteco population (FUNCEDE 13). They estimated that 15% of the population migrated to the South Coast of Guatemala, 15% migrated to Mexico and 10% migrated to USA. Many were displaced by the civil war; few (187) were repatriated. Today, migration is still present in Jacaltenango, but most migrants travel all the way north to the United States. A major destination for Jacaltecos is Jupiter, Florida. There has been a network of Jacaltecos in Jupiter since the 1980s.

e. From Jacaltenango to Jupiter: Close Links and Transnational Gossip

There are approximately 4,000 Guatemalans and Mexicans living in Jupiter, out of which an estimated 1,000 are from Jacaltenango (Steigenga 6). Jupiter is a city located on the east coast of south Florida. As of 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau recorded a population of 46,752 out of which 7.3 percent are Hispanic or Latino. Jacaltenango and Jupiter have very pronounced transnational links; they have signed a "sister-cities"

agreement that promotes trade and cultural exchange between both cities. Additionally, Jacalteco immigrants maintain tight relationships with their families and communities in Guatemala, which increases the transnational connection between both cities. Jacaltecos in Jupiter are in constant communication with their home towns, most have cell phones and also use mail, or word of mouth to communicate with their relatives and friends. There is a radio station that is aired in AM waves in both Jupiter and Jacaltenango that permits both communities of Jacaltecos to be up to date with events that happen in both cities. This close link between these two cities enables the easy and fast transfer of information.

One type of information that is being transferred on a daily basis is transnational gossip. People in both cities are very much aware of the daily happenings and gossip of their community members regardless of whether they are living in the United States or in Guatemala. As Laura, one of my respondents described, “My husband tells me that he finds out about anything that happens here [in Jacaltenango] within hours, and it is the same for me. If something is going on in Jupiter I find out straight away through friends and family.” All interviewees were very attuned and aware of the transnational gossip and what it meant in their daily lives.

IV. The Voices of Jacalteco Women: Insights from the Interviews

During the summer of 2006 I interviewed twelve Jacalteco women whose husbands were living abroad. The interviews focused on what life was like before the family member migrated and how their lives changed after. Specifically, interviews focused on how women perceived their lives had been impacted ever since their husbands

left. Taking into account the patriarchal system present in Jacaltenango, my initial intention was to observe whether Jacalteco women had gained freedoms, responsibilities, power and independence in the absence of their spouses. However, as the interviews unfolded I realized my approach to this study was too detached from the lived realities of women in Jacaltenango. Even though respondents were willing to share their experiences regarding their work, control over money, independence etc. our conversations frequently ended up focusing on their personal sufferings due to the absence of their loved one(s). The interviews shed light on the individual and family gains related to migration, and how benefits vary from one family to the next. More importantly, the interviews uncovered important details that are frequently absent in academic treatments of migration, gender, and development. In particular, the interviewed women expressed the negative psychological and physical impacts that migration had on their lives.

Among the women I interviewed, the fear of being subject to gossip and rumors prevailed over any perceived gain in autonomy and authority. Even though some respondents reported they had gained some freedoms and responsibilities ever since their husbands left, they were seldom involved in the public sphere (participating in the community or at work) because they were afraid negative rumors about their behavior would reach their husbands' ears in Florida. Additionally, the constant suffering and anxiety transformed into physical and psychological illnesses. Their poor health also contributed to their lessened desire to participate in the public sphere and sometimes interfered with their responsibilities in the private sphere.

a. Transnational Gossip

Immigrants in Jupiter are highly aware of the daily activities of their families in Jacaltenango and vice versa. The social pressures imposed by these seemingly innocent conversations have a central role in how women's lives change with their spouse's migration. Carmen (interviewed in Jacaltenango, June 2006) explains this process:

Women whose husbands are in the US are constantly being watched by others. Everybody likes talking about you, about how unfaithful and, spendthrift you are. About how you always misspend the hard earned money your husband sends you from abroad and about how you don't appreciate their hard work. As soon as you leave your house people are looking at you, noticing every step you take. However, they do not notice that you are building a house and raising a child; instead they always say you are misspending money.

As Carmen notes, neighbors and family friends are constantly keeping an eye on the de facto single mother. The *vox populi* in Jacaltenango and Jupiter usually criticize women whose spouses are living abroad. Women generate a fear of being gossiped about, and are concerned that their husbands will get rumors about them being unfaithful and/or being irresponsible with their money. Anya Canache's interviews with the Jacaltecos of Jupiter corroborate their fears. Canache explains that immigrants in Jupiter spoke of how their partners in Guatemala often throw lavish parties, start drinking with their friends, and do not realize how hard it is to make money in the United States. Women are keenly aware of this perception, and do everything possible to live a life that leaves no doubt in everyone else's mind that they are being responsible and loyal.

Consequently, some women feel pressured to limit their lives to the private sphere of their homes. Maria, another woman interviewed in Jacaltenango in June 2006, explained "I don't go out, when my children are at school I stay at home doing chores,

and when they come home I just take care of their needs. I do not really go out other than for a walk that my doctor prescribed.” Like Maria, other women also explained that for the most part they stayed at home and did not attend parties, meetings or community events.

Women whose spouses are abroad are subject to constant criticism. As Datta and McIlwaine argue in their study, Guatemalan society disapproves of single mothers. Although women with a migrant spouse are technically not single, society has very similar disdains for women with migrant spouses. As a result, women hold back from being more active in the community. Women explain that they prefer to stay home rather than attend a party or meeting with their friends because they are afraid others will start saying that they are seeing other men and being careless with their money. Anita, a mother of two whose husband has been away for five years explains:

There is a problem here, when there is a party or festival the first thing people do is film it. They film it and later send the video to our husbands in Jupiter. This sometimes creates conflicts, say sometimes you are just dancing and they start saying things that are not true just because you were dancing. So I am a little bit afraid of that. I am not doing anything wrong, but people always comment on everything so you have to always be careful (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Gossip impels women to refrain from participating in public events. Women are concerned that any public appearance might spark a rumor that could lead to relationship problems. Therefore, they generally prefer staying at home and abstain from participating in community festivities and events. Lupe, another Jacalteco interviewee, is very clear about why she has decided not to participate in the community:

When men leave, we are afraid of gossip. Because when men are over there [in the United States], people tell them that we are doing bad things. That is my fear. What if my husband hears a rumor about me? What if he

leaves me because of it? What will happen to me and my children?
(Jacaltenango, June 2006)

Her fear is not exactly about being gossiped about, but about the possibility that her marriage might fail due to such gossip. Sometimes these worries are so great, that women avoid partaking in the workforce. Carmen had been working for several years in a company, and after her husband left, rumors and gossip caused her to leave her job.

Carmen describes her personal experience:

My husband told me that some of his best friends said I was being unfaithful. Due to the type of job I had I mostly worked with men. We would get together at 5 am, traveled to different places and spend the whole day working together. Simply because people saw me leave and come back with different men, people started saying I was being unfaithful to my husband. This created a lot of tensions in our relationship (Jacaltenango, June 2006)

Carmen decided that the best thing for her relationship and her family was to leave her job and dedicate her full attention to her house and child. She commented that she would eventually like working again, maybe when her husband returns from the United States.

Another reason why society disapproves of single mothers or de facto single mothers is that women who are raising their children by themselves are often seen by others as a recipe for problem children. Canache notes that immigrants in Jupiter say that “there are problems in the family because the kids are going wild without the fathers there to help the mothers raise them, and many have fallen into vices” (Canache 49). Such perceptions also place a lot of pressure, responsibility and blame on the mother which results in further seclusion from the rest of society.

Transnational gossip plays a big role in the marginalization of women whose husbands live abroad. The constant worries that their husbands will hear rumors about them makes women feel uncomfortable about actively partaking in the public sphere.

Furthermore, such worries combined with the effects of marginalization have also caused these women many health related problems.

b. Health

The constant seclusion, and distance from their loved ones, often results in health problems for women who stay in Jacaltenango. Several interviewees mentioned having health problems ever since their husbands migrated. Women expressed that their psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety and sadness often led to physical illnesses. Maria a sister and wife to migrants that live in Jupiter, describes her health ever since her husband left.

He has been over there [in the United States] for a while now, I am already sick...I'm sick because of my loneliness... There are things I would like to tell my husband, but it's not the same if we are far away. It's hard.... It hurts so much because of my kids. It's so difficult. He is so loving, I miss him...It's not easy. You can see my sadness on my face; my skin started getting stained a little after he left. Loneliness has affected me a lot, that is why I am not okay, and parts of my face are now discolored (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Women in Jacaltenango are seeing doctors to help them get through their problems. The doctors often prescribe medical drugs and sometimes they just recommended 30-minute daily walks. Maria also explains that the doctor told her to walk outside; otherwise, she would not be seeing much sun. The doctor said she could not be inside her house all day because it could worsen her despair. A local pharmacist also reported that lately many women with migrant spouses or migrant family members have been buying anti-depressants, medicine for high blood pressure, and other types of medicine to help their anxieties.

When asked about their health, most women would reply “I’ve been ill, very ill...” and “I’ve been sick, I want some company.” Not only do they feel lonely because their partners are distant, but also because often their families and community reject them and are constantly criticizing them. Maria tells about how her father-in-law pressures her a lot now that her husband is away. She explains that her father-in-law is very demanding and despite the fact that they have built a block-house and all four of her children are attending school, he is constantly saying bad things about her. Maria claims his pressures and disapproval contribute to her poor health.

When husbands leave for the United States, women are often left with little if any support system. Consequently, it is harder for women to get more involved in their communities. First, they have all household responsibilities and have little time to participate in the community. And second, their health and the societal pressures push them to stay within their households. The marginalization affects their access to various opportunities, and their loneliness strongly affects their quality of life.

c. Women in the Private Sphere – Money, Authority, and Independence

Many academics have raised questions that reflect on the impact of migration on gender roles within the household; is migration giving more independence to women within the household? Do women gain authority when their husbands are absent? Are women gaining control of the family finances? As I noted earlier, academics hold opposing views about the answers to these questions. Some observers conclude that migration has decreased the male authority within the household as a result of his absence (Lawson 1998; Gammage 2003). Other studies argue that despite the absence of the

father/husband, the patriarchal system in the sending communities has not changed (Forbes Martin 2003; Ramírez et.al. 2005).

One of the major debates within the literature is whether women gain control of family finances once their spouses migrate. Some academics argue that women have gained control of money matters by taking control of remittances. Conversely, other scholars argue that women are indeed receiving remittances, but the decisions on how to invest are still made by the migrant. Part of the interviews aimed to measure whether women were in charge of financial decisions within their household. As the debate suggests, the interviewees gave varying responses.

Some Jacalteco women explained that at the moment neither they nor their husband decided how to spend their money because all remittances were being used to pay off their debt. Olga, a mother of two whose husband has been living in Jupiter for over a year, expressed:

In our case we have to pay off our debt of Q75,000 (nearly US\$10,000)
We have not finished paying for the money we borrowed, so whatever he
sends home I go drop it off where we borrowed the money. Everything
goes towards paying off our debt (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Olga's situation was shared by other women; control over money had not varied ever since their husbands left because remittances were pre-determined to go towards paying off debt. Alternatively, some women explained that their husbands made all monetary decisions. For example, Margarita answered that her husband who has been living in Florida would either send explicit instructions about how to spend the remittances, or he would take care of things when he returned to visit their family.

Other Jacalteco women responded that decisions about investments were taken together, by them and their husbands. Participants that said they had shared control over the money explained that they always maintain constant and close communication with their husbands and this enables them to still take decisions as a couple. Lupe explained, “I tell him what is going on here, and then we decide how we need to spend the money.” The women who shared control over the family finances also expressed that they did so as well before their spouse migrated.

Yet, other participants stated that they were in charge of all financial decisions, and they were taking care of large investments using the money sent by their husbands. These women explained that there was a lot of trust in their relationships and therefore the husband trusted them with their finances. One of the women described that she had previous experience with managing large sums of money (skills from her job) and therefore, her husband would trust her with all their family investments. She also had attained a college degree, having the highest educational background of the group of women I interviewed. The women who claimed to have control of the family finances had the highest degree of education overall.

Women who had control over the family finances and had a higher degree of education also claimed that they felt they had gained authority in their households after their husbands migrated. In my interviews, I attempted to measure whether each woman gained authority by asking her if she gave permissions to her children within the house before and after her spouse migrated, and whether or not she had to ask for permission to go out from her husband. By permissions I am referring to the power to authorize or prohibit actions such as leaving the house, attending a party, meeting friends etc.

According to Lawson (1998) the father's absence in cases of migration transfers permission-giving authority to the mother. When a father leaves, the mother gains command because she is present for daily events and therefore is more accessible than the father.

When asked who gave permissions within the household when both parents were in the household, most women answered that the father was in charge of giving the children permissions. Claudia, mother of four, explains that "the father is in charge of giving permission to our children." For the most part participants described that the decision making process had not changed with their husband's absence. They explained that they did not see why things would change after his departure. As one participant rationalized; "Even if he [the father] is not here, he still has the right, he is sending money and we have to ask him about everything." The interviewees explained that their husbands were *temporarily* gone and therefore, they were still entitled to their role as a father. Participants also reported that if they wanted to go out, or were invited somewhere, they would get permission from their husbands in order to go out. They explained that when their husbands were at home they would ask him, and so they just continued to ask him once he had migrated.

The interviews revealed that there is a strong sense of family structure even if the husband is absent from home. The father's role is still strongly respected and the distance does not necessarily translate into a change in the dynamics of the household decision-making (permission-giving) process. For the most part the husbands were still in charge of giving permissions both to their children and to their wives. Nevertheless, there were signs of change in certain interviews, in which a couple of women described that ever

since their husband had left they had taken charge of giving permissions to their children. Moreover, some women explained that sometimes they would ask men for permission officially, but practically they made the final decisions. That is, women sometimes left the house or let their children leave the house or miss school; even if their husbands had told them that they would rather they or their children not go out. The impacts of migration are more complicated than a simple “black or white” approach sometimes implied in the literature on gender and migration. In some senses it influences progress towards gender equality, in other senses traditional patriarchal gender roles are strongly maintained. This dichotomy is very ambiguous because it does not take into account other factors that are highly influencing gender relations. The most important factors affecting women in Jacaltenango whose spouses live abroad are their level of education, the presence of transnational gossip, and the nature of their relationship with their spouse prior to migration.

d. Women in the Public Sphere: Work, Religious Participation and Community Involvement

An issue that has not been as widely studied as the effects of migration on the private sphere is the effects of migration on female participation in the community and in the work force. Certain questions arise when considering the impacts of migration on gender roles in the public sphere: Do women resort to work for income? Are they participating in the community? Is the population’s gender imbalance changing the socio-political arena? The women I interviewed shared similar views and experiences on the

majority of these questions, and as I mentioned above, transnational gossip plays a significant role in their experiences.

As Aysa and Massey (2004) explain in their study, women tend to resort to work in the transitioning period immediately after the migrant leaves until they have paid off the debt they incurred in their travels. For those participants who reported they still had debts to pay, they all had gotten a job (or were trying to get a job) in order to afford daily expenses. One of the women described the various jobs she had gotten after her husband left,

I work now, I go out to clean houses and do laundry. I sometimes sell fruit too, but now selling fruit is not enough, so I also go out to work in different houses here in Jacaltenango (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Some women work after their husbands leave because very little money is left after paying off debt and/or family expenses and therefore they often need two incomes to afford their living. These participants also expressed that it was important to them to have a job because they would often think about what would occur to them and their children if something were to happen to their husbands abroad and they depended solely on his income.

Although having the additional job(s) is very important to the women I interviewed, they also explained how difficult it was to find one. When asked what job she currently had, Carmen explained:

Finding a job as an indigenous woman and mother is hard; having your husband abroad makes finding a job and keeping one even harder. In my case, it is particularly hard to find a job because I am here without my husband and everybody is always criticizing what I do, and as result of so much social disapproval, I end up being rejected... it is harder to get hired (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

The social stigma associated with single and de facto single women affects women's ability to secure a job, as Carmen explained. Especially because there is a general understanding that the mother should be taking care of her children, and therefore should not be working. In fact, their numerous responsibilities at home did indeed make it harder for them to have the time to look for a job. For example, there were two women who stopped working when their husbands migrated. They both explained that right after they stopped working they realized they needed the extra money and started looking for jobs, but had not been successful in their search. One of them explained that she was now too busy around the house to go back to work. She was interested in going back to school but noted that she would only be able to go back to study when her husband returned from the United States and would be there to help her around the house.

Women often described having a hard time finding a job and keeping it. Carmen's experience exemplifies the difficulty involved in keeping a job. Her agricultural job involved working with male peers, and the gossip and rumors that arose from her job were so intense that she decided it was better for her family's sake to quit the job. Although women and their families often need the extra income (especially during the transition period), social marginalization often makes it hard for them to be successful in the work force.

My interviews also included questions about women's participation in their local and extended communities both before and after the family member migrated. The questions aimed to answer whether the socio-political arena in rural Guatemalan towns were being reconstituted with the emigration of so many male residents. Generally, women tend to be more active in the community when their husbands are absent.

However, the extent of their participation was limited to religious groups and church meetings. For example, Anita explains that from the time her husband left she has been participating in church groups:

I have been involved in the “*Consejo Pastoral*” ever since my husband left... Sometimes I don’t have anything else to do at home, so I like going there because I can listen to God’s words. I tell my husband about my experiences there, and he tells me that it is a good thing to go to Church. That is how I am involved in my community (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Women generally expressed that the religious groups helped them because they felt more in touch with God and their spirituality. They also expressed that they felt the need to pray for their husbands’ wellbeing as well as thank God for everything they have achieved so far, and the church provided them with a channel to do so. All but one woman self-identified as Catholic. Margarita, a self-identified Jehovah’s Witness, also described that ever since her husband left she had become more active in her Church and was learning more about the bible so that she could teach it to others.

I spend my time in Church, I study the book. My group and I go visit people and talk to them about the book. I learn and then I teach people what little I have learned (Margarita, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

For the most part, this was the type of participation women reported when asked if they were involved in their community. Maria, however, explained that her husband’s migration did have a clear impact in her community involvement. She stated that when her husband lived in Jacaltenango, only he participated. He was an associate in the Coffee Cooperative and when he left (six years ago) Maria took his position. Now that is how she participates in the community. Maria was the only interviewee who reported that her involvement went beyond religious activities. In contrast, Anita explained that after her husband left she partook in fewer community proceedings and activities.

I participate less now that he is gone... before we would find out about things through his friends and co-workers. But now I rarely find out what is going on. Like yesterday's talk [on immigrants in the United States], I only found out about until it had already started. I like to participate, but I rarely do (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

The same social exclusion that makes it hard for women to obtain and keep a job, affects the extent of their participation in the community. With the exception of Maria, women with husbands abroad were usually outside of the networks of information and opportunities. Even if they were aware of community festivities, some women expressed that they preferred staying away from those events because they feared rumors. Lupe explains,

I do not participate in the community. When men leave one is always afraid of gossip. Because when they [our husbands] are far away, people start telling them things about what you are or are not doing. I am too afraid that my husband will hear a rumor (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Migration has a clear impact on women's public participation. On one hand, they become more active in their religious and church groups. Their participation in these groups opens their doors to a system of support and gives them the opportunity to grow stronger spiritually. But, on the other hand, with the absence of their husbands women lose their space in the social networks and also often prefer to stay at home. The reasons behind their personal preference to stay at home may vary greatly, but most women expressed very similar hindrances: their poor health, fear of gossip, and extensive household responsibilities.

e. Recommendations to a Close Friend or Family Member

At the end of each interview I asked each participant what they would personally recommend to a close friend or family member if their husband was hypothetically about to migrate to the United States. Their answers were truly telling and encapsulated the complexity that goes along with the family decision of whether or not the husband/father should migrate to the United States. When asked what they would recommend to women whose husbands were supposedly thinking of migrating, the interviewees performed a cost-benefit analysis that took into account their personal gains and losses that resulted from their husband's migration.

When presented with this hypothetical situation, women recognized that first it was critical to determine exactly how strenuous their financial situation was, and that the family should contemplate if it is absolutely indispensable for a family member to leave the country to attain a better economic state. Some women suggested that traveling to the US is often seen as the only solution to improve the family's quality of life, but explained that they would recommend looking into other (closer) options first. Carmen's account voices the views of many of the interviewed women:

When I have the chance to give my advice, I always say, I prefer a thousand times for a husband to stay, even if the family has to go through tough times, than for a husband to abandon his family... Sometimes I hear my nephews talking, they say, "I want my dad to go the Unites States so that he can send us a lot of money." But I tell them, money is not worth anything compared to the love a father can give you. The smallest affection your dad gives you is worth more than a million dollars. I try to explain this to everyone, the love a husband and father can give you if he is there is worth much more than the money he sends... But you know how it is; without money you cannot survive, that is why they go, so that we can eat and survive. There is no money here (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Carmen and other interviewed women explained that they would certainly try to persuade their friend or family member to convince her husband against traveling away from home; but would understand if the husband decides to go. They would emphasize that having the family together is vital for everyone's wellbeing, so unless it is absolutely necessary they would recommend against migrating.

Lupe is very close to her sister and she explained that the last thing she would want is to see her sister suffer like she has suffered. Lupe said she would not want her sister to go through that experience; however, if she sees that her sister and her family are currently in a really bad situation and the husband migrates to the US, then she would fully understand their decision. Maria also shared a similar opinion, she explained,

The truth is that I wouldn't want him risking himself like that; but sometimes there is so much need that even if you don't want to, there is no other option (Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Families are often caught between a rock and a hard place. Their most viable solution to survive and improve their economic state is for a family member to migrate to the US. Yet, if the family member migrates, it means the family will be incomplete and divided at least temporarily. Nobody gave a definite remedy to their problems, nor offered a sure choice between these two choices. But, when the economic situation is so dire, even those who have suffered through a family division understand the need for a family member to migrate to the United States in search for economic improvement.

V. Conclusions

During the summer of 2006, I interviewed twelve Jacalteco women that were personally experiencing the phenomenon of international migration. They live in Jacaltenango, a rural town in highland Guatemala, while their husbands reside and work in Jupiter, Florida. Like many other women in Guatemala and around the world, they had taken responsibility of their homes and family while their husbands were absent. Very few studies have delved into how migration impacts women's lives in the sending communities, and the question of how their life quality is affected has been largely neglected in migration literature. The personal accounts presented here bring new insights about the social impacts and the individual costs of migration and suggest that the debate on migration and gender needs to be reframed to include surrounding factors that may be affecting gender roles in sending communities, and to investigate the emergence of transnational gossip as a form of social control and a way to perpetuate the existing power relations in sending communities.

The voices of these women bring to light important insights that help us understand the impact that migration has on gender relations in Guatemala. The close link between international cities develops a transnational gossip that strongly influences the way individuals, families and societies interact. The images of women produced by gossip contribute to the already established social stigma of single mothers and female heads of households in Guatemala. The general perception held by many migrants and other community members is that women are mispending money, having affairs, abusing alcohol and are unable to discipline their children. Women in Jacaltenango are very aware of these images and thus, consciously try to act as proper as possible and as

far apart from these images as possible. They often refrain from interacting with their community members and prefer staying home to avoid any misunderstandings. For women in Jacaltenango, this transnational gossip has resulted in isolation from the community, increased anxieties and health problems. In that sense, gossip has served as a form of social control that restrains women from participating in their communities.

The isolation that ensues from migration and transnational gossip greatly affects gender roles in Guatemala. Women whose husbands are absent find it particularly difficult to find and keep a job. They are often left out of the social networks of information and opportunities. As Garrard-Burnett points out, after the civil war in Guatemala when husbands were absent, women lost their status in the local hierarchies of kinship. A similar effect takes place when the husbands are absent due to international migration. Women often lose their status in the local hierarchy and find it more difficult to take part in the work force and in public events.

Transnational gossip, combined with loneliness and anxieties associated with migration also cause health difficulties for many women. Many interviewed women reported having psychological problems such as depression and also physical problems such as high blood pressure and hair loss. Most women were unaware that other women in their situation were living similar health problems. A support group led by a professional psychologist may help women overcome their poor health and may provide women with much needed emotional help. Currently, religious groups are simultaneously serving as avenues of spiritual guidance and as support groups. The interviewed women in Jacaltenango became very active in their religious groups. These groups have a three-fold benefit: they provide women with a channel to circumvent transnational gossip and

have contact with other community members; they give women a change in their daily routines; and they provide them with emotional encouragement and religious support.

Additionally, migration influenced the role of women in their households. The direct impacts of migration in the private sphere are ambiguous because there are signs of slight changes in women's power in their household and in some cases even significant transfers of authority from the male to the female; particularly, for women who had a higher level of education. Yet the patriarchal family structures are still well defined and respected. Generally the husbands' absence has not broken down the patriarchal structure of the family, and often it is still he who maintains decision making power. The original nature of the relationship and level of education, more than the migratory status, seemed to be the critical factors in roles of authority.

These effects of migration transcend ethnicity, as both ladino and indigenous women reported substantial economic benefits and explained that migration also brought forth loneliness, jealousies, anxieties, and problems in family relationships. In Llano Grande (a ladino community) and Jacaltenango (a Mayan community) women expressed suffering as result of migration despite their new increased income. The only aspect that varied between ethnicities was the degree of control women had over money. Ladino women reported that women that received remittances tended to be in charge of handling money more than indigenous women.

The interviews I conducted in Jacaltenango suggest that both sides of the debate in the literature hold some truth. Migration is in some instances increasing female decision-making and power in some areas of their lives, and at the same time migration is increasing women's dependence and subordination. However, the debate on the impacts

of migration thus far has been missing a key factor. The literature has not taken into account how migration impacts the *quality of life* of women in sending communities. While women answered questions regarding their extent of monetary control, authority, participation, etc. almost inevitably interviews quickly turned to the many personal sufferings caused by migration. Interviewed women valued having their family together and having their husbands next to their sides higher than any increase in permission-giving power or authority. Based on their recommendations to a family member or friend, we can see that having any increased autonomy is not a benefit taken into account when deciding if a husband should migrate.

The insights brought forth by this study can be broadened and developed with survey research that takes account of respondents' over all health and mental stability, comparing families that send migrants to families who do not send migrants. Further studies of migration and gender should take into account not only the state of gender relations for couples prior to migration, but also the role that transnational gossip plays in restricting women's abilities to exercise the freedoms that may be assumed to come with increased income and physical autonomy in the home community. The mental and physical health problems my respondents unanimously attributed to distance from their spouses (combined with transnational gossip) merit a central place in the debate about the effects of migration on gender relations in communities of origin.

Remittances have had such an immense economic impact in developing communities that migration scholarship has, for the most part, focused attention on macro dimensions and has paid very little attention to the individual impacts of migration. This study brings the voices of individuals to the forefront and highlights the high and often

neglected human impacts of migration. This study uncovers transnational gossip, a phenomenon that is helping define the social structures of Jacaltenango and possibly other sending communities. Furthermore, it brings attention to the complex implications that migration has on gender roles in Jacaltenango, Guatemala and some of the negative impacts migration has on the quality of life of women and families whose husbands have migrated to the United States.

Sources Consulted

- Anonymous. Personal Interviews by author, June 20, 2006. Jacaltenango, Guatemala.
- Anonymous. Personal Interviews by Carol Girón and Irene Palma, May 30, 2006. Llano Grande Guatemala.
- Aysa, María and Douglas Massey. "Wives Left Behind: The Labor Market Behavior of Women in Migrant Communities." *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*. Ed. Jorge Durand and Douglass S. Massey. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2004. 131-146.
- Bradford Burns, E., and Julie A. Charlip. *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*. 7th. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Canache, Anya. *The Maya in Jupiter, Florida: Remittances and Immigrant Perceptions of Change in the Home Community*. Honors Thesis, Harriet L. Wilkes Honors Collage, Florida Atlantic University. May, 2003.
- Carter, Marion W. "Gender and Community Context: An Analysis of Husbands' Household Authority in Rural Guatemala." *Sociology Forum* 19.4 (2004): 633-652.
- Castillo, Manuel Ángel. "Las dimensiones de las migraciones futuras: Un desafío a las políticas públicas." *Seminario Problemas y Desafíos de la Migración y el Desarrollo en América*. Cuernavaca, April 2005.
- Cornelius, Wayne A. "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Control Policy." *Population and Development Review* 27.4 (2001): 661-685.
- Dardón Sosa, Jacobo. "Las Comunidades de Origen de la Migración Internacional en el Altiplano Occidental de Guatemala." *Después de Nuestro Señor, Estados Unidos*. Guatemala: FLACSO, 2004. 141-58.
- Datta, Kavita, and Cathy McIlwaine. "'Empowered leaders'? Perspectives on women heading households in Latin America and Southern Africa." *Gender and Development* 8.3 (2000): 40-49.
- Dore, Elizabeth. "The Holy Family: Imagined Households in Latin American History." *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997. 101-117.

- Eschbach, Karl; Jacqueline Hagan; Nestor Rodriguez; Ruben Hernandez-Leon; Stanley Bailey. "Death at the Border" *International Migration Review* 33.2 (1999): 430-454.
- Forbes Martin, Susan. "Women and Migration." *Proceedings of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women*, December 2-4, 2003: Consultative meeting on Migration and Mobility and How This Movement Affects Women. Sweden: United Nations, 2003.
- Fundación Centroamericana de Desarrollo (FUNCEDE). "Diagnostico y Plan de Desarrollo del Municipio de Jacaltenango, Departamento de Huehuetenango." Guatemala, 1994.
- Gammage, Sarah. "Migration and Poverty in El Salvador: Shifting Gender Roles and Investment Strategies." *Proceedings of the Primer Coloquio Internacional: Migración y Desarrollo*, October 23-25, 2003 Mexico.
- Garrard-Burnett, Virginia. "Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues in Post conflict Guatemala." U.S. Agency for International Development: Center for Development Information and Evaluation. Washington, September 2000.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. "Gender and Immigration: A Retrospective and Introduction." *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*. Ed. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. Berkeley: U of California P. 2003: 3-19.
- International Organization for Migration. *National Survey on Family Remittances: Year 2003*. Guatemala: August 2003.
- La Farge, Oliver, and Douglas Byers. *El Pueblo del Cargador del Año. (The Year Bearer's People)*. Guatemala: CIRMA, 1997.
- Lawson, Victoria A. "Hierarchical households and gendered migration in Latin America: feminist extensions to migration research." *Progress in Human Geography* 22.1, (1998): 39-53.
- Levitt, Peggy. "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion." *International Migration Review* 32.4, (1998): 926-948.
- Montecinos, Sonia. "A New Type of Femininity and Masculinity: Looking at Gender in the Evangelical World of La Pintana." *Estudios Públicos de Chile*, 2003.
- Palma, Silvia Irene, Carol Girón Solórzano and Timothy Steigenga. "Nuevas Comunidades en los Estados Unidos: De Jacaltenango a Júpiter: Negociando el Concepto de Familia en el Espacio Transnacional y el Tiempo." *Comunidades en*

- Movimiento: La Migración Internacional en el Norte de Huehuetenango*. Ed. Manuela Camus. Guatemala: INCEDES. 2007: 171-204.
- Ramírez, Carlota, Mar García Domínguez, and Julia Míguez Morais. *Crossing Borders: Remittances, Gender and Development*. United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. INSTRAW, 2005.
- Rodríguez, Luisa F. "Economía guatemalteca recibe inyección de dólares." *Prensa Libre, Reportajes especiales* (Guatemala), 6ta. Entrega, 2005.
- . "Remesas de inmigrantes constituyen motor de la economía nacional." *Prensa Libre, Reportajes especiales* (Guatemala), 5ta. Entrega, 2005.
- Salazar, Ana. "Mazahuas: la migración deja 886 pueblos de mujeres en 44 municipios del estado de México." *La Jornada*. México DF 53, January 2003.
- Sana, Mariano. "Household Composition, Family Migration and Community Context. Migrant Remittances in Tour Countries." *Proceedings of the Latin American Studies Association Meeting*, March 27-29, 2003: Texas, 2003.
- Smith, Carol. "Race-Class-Gender Ideology in Guatemala: Modern and Anti-Modern Forms." *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* (1995): 723-749.
- Suárez, Blanca, and Emma Zapata Martelo. "Desde milagros hasta obras públicas realizan campesinas con remesas de migrantes." *La Jornada*. México DF 53, January, 2003.
- Steigenga, Timothy. "Lived Religion and a Sense of Home: The Ambiguities of Transnational Identity among Jacaltecos in Jupiter." Forthcoming in *Beyond Miami*. Rutgers UP. 2008.
- . Personal Interview. April 10, 2007.
- Vallejo Mora, Guadalupe. "Empodera a las mujeres la migración de hijos y esposos." *Criterios Periodismo Independiente Mexico DF*, 09 November, 2005.
- Waslin, Michele. "The New Meaning of the Border: U.S.-Mexico Migration since 9/11." *Project on Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico*, Center for U.S. Mexican Studies, 2003.
- World Bank. *Global Economic Prospects: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration*. Washington DC, 2006.