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The impact of migration on gender roles in Guatemala

For decades social scientists have studied the phenomenon of international migration. Many have pointed out the effects of migration in both the sending and receiving communities; however, it was not until recently that researchers began to take into account gender relations when analyzing migration (Ramírez *et al* 2005, Gammage 2003, Martin 2003, Lawson 1998, Salazar 2003, Aysa and Massey 2004, Datta and McIlwaine 2000). In Guatemala, for example, women often stay at home while their husband or eldest son migrates. Consequently women become *de facto* head of the household, which is atypical in a prevalently patriarchal society.

Contrary to popular belief, female-headed households are not new to Guatemala and Latin America. Elizabeth Dore points out that since the 1970's studies have shown there have been a number of female headed households all through out Latin America. Dore argues that although the hierarchical and patriarchal legacies of the colonies can still be discerned in Latin America, the unquestioned universality of a male-lead household is a "myth." In practice, many households were (and are) headed by women. In fact, like Virginia Garrard-

Burnett (2000) explains, post-conflict Guatemala had entire communities of houses that were led by women.

Garrard-Burnett expressed that the 36-year civil war in Guatemala proved to be disastrous in countless ways. Among other devastating incidents, 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 in Guatemalan history, thousands of women were widowed or left behind by their displaced fathers, husbands and/or sons. This is how many women became household leaders. Nevertheless, “in making the transition from wife to widow, women lost their status relative to their husbands. Maya widows sometimes also lost their places within the local hierarchies of kinship” (Garrard-Burnett, 7). Even if women were in charge within their households, it was particularly difficult for them to prosper in a patriarchal society. Guatemalan society in general, including Mayan sectors, tends to be highly patriarchal (Garrard-Burnett). *Machismo* is prevalent all over the country. Additionally, Garrard-Burnett describes the continual patriarchal presence in Guatemala. 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. So, even though a rising number of women were in charge of their households, male headed households notably outnumbered female headed households in Guatemala.

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. Mariano Sana (2003) argues that "by sending a family member to work away from home, a household makes an investment that is expected to pay off when the migrant remittances arrive" (3). Migration, especially to the United States (where workers get paid higher rates and in dollars), is an entrepreneurial move on behalf of families.

Although many researchers have pointed out the importance of gender in understanding the phenomenon of migration, few have focused their studies on how migration specifically affects the position and role of females who stay behind in the sending communities. In fact, many of the researchers highlight the need for more studies to consider such impacts of migration. According to contemporary researchers (Martin 2003; Lawson 1998; Carter 2004) such a study is timely. Lawson expresses, "migration theory will be significantly enriched through attention to feminist research on the inner workings of migrant households" (43).

This paper focuses on how migration has affected gender relations and women's role in Guatemala. The paper is divided in three parts. The first part reviews the existing literature that discusses how migration and remittances affect gender roles in Guatemalan and other Latin American households (particularly, the cases of Mexico and El Salvador). The second part takes a

closer look at the case of Guatemala to further understand the different impacts that migration and remittances have in gender relations within Guatemalan households and communities. Finally drawing on the case study of Jacaltenango, Huehuetenango I propose a study design for the future. I plan on testing whether migration has altered the wives' role in Jacalteko households that send migrants to Jupiter, Florida. Considering the demographics and embedded patriarchal system of the area, I project that women are still subordinate to men despite any alterations in gender roles due to migration.

Migration trends and impacts in Guatemala

Ramírez, Domínguez and Morais (2005) point out that "women constitute the majority of recipients of remittances" (31). For a number of reasons (many of which are tied with gender relations) it is generally men who migrate. First, sending a family member abroad is very costly (both legally and illegally); therefore, generally families can only afford for one person to migrate as opposed to a whole family. Costs for legal and illegal migration have rocketed since the September 11th attacks in the United States when stricter Homeland Security measures were implemented (Waslin, 2003). 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, Michele Waslin (2003) describes 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. Waslin explains that The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act (EBSVER), signed in May 2002, increased security measures intended to keep terrorists out of the United States and such measures had a significant impact on the U.S.-Mexico border security enforcement. Consequently, *coyotes* (people who get paid to smuggle migrants across the borders) charge more for their services because border security became 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 (Orrenius, 2001). The high costs that go along with migrating explain why families carefully choose which member(s) migrate.

Second, as border security becomes tougher (in both Mexico and the United States) and migrating becomes highly dangerous and risky, fewer women tend to migrate. United States implemented the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 which intended to deter illegal immigrants from crossing the border, so, a higher budget was allotted to the INS and border enforcement which meant that the border security was tightened. Following IRCA, the U.S. implemented the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which increased penalties on smugglers and illegal migrants, and mandated a doubling of the Border Patrol by 2001 (Orrenius). More recently, the U.S. implemented the EBSVER 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. For example, the Dallas Morning News (November

3, 2005) writes, “Hundreds of volunteers from across the country wrapped up a month long patrol along the U.S.-Mexico border.” As border security and enforcement has heightened, the risks of crossing the border have become even fatal at times. Physical stereotypes alone would lead one to think that enduring the strife of migration would be easier for men than for women. In a patriarchal society men are usually viewed as the stronger and physically powerful of both genders, and logically, they would be most fit to endure and overcome the obstacles placed by stringent border security measures.

Third, industrialized nations (such as the United States) increasingly demand a workforce of “male labor.” There is a greater variety of employment opportunities for men (Lawson), such as, landscaping, construction, farming, etc. Fourth, it is easier for men to mobilize once they have arrived to their country of destination because they have closer ties to the kinship and community networks that are created trans-nationally (Gammage; Castillo, 2005). 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 have arrived to their destination (Orrenius). Finally, it is predetermined in Guatemalan society that women’s responsibilities and duties exist mostly within the house; such as, care-taking and nursing. Lawson describes that for over two decades researchers highlight that women’s place in Latin America is “still the private sphere of home and family.” This important domestic role makes it that much more difficult for women to leave their families and responsibilities behind. Notwithstanding, in recent years women have also

increasingly become active participants in the migration phenomenon; however, for the above mentioned reasons, the majority of migrants are still male.

Is migration breaking down the patriarchal structure of Guatemalan households?

Ramírez *et al*. set out the importance of migration and remittances when they explain that the "management of remittances can catalyze transformations in gender relations, and in turn, stimulate social, cultural, economic and political change" (23). Different studies hold opposing views on the effects of migration and remittances on gender roles. On one hand, researchers have pointed out that migration and remittances have increased female decision-making and power within the household. Whereas, on the other hand, other studies have shown that migration in fact increases women's dependence and subordination.

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, 1998). Women 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, 2003). In this sense, women have acquired a special and important role in the development of the local Guatemalan economy.

Ana Salazar (2003) uses the case of México to explore the effects of migration on women. She explains that migrants have left behind “886 towns of women.” 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. For example, María Aysa and Douglas Massey’s study shows that women are also often responsible for generating an income meanwhile the migrant travels, settles, and collects enough money to pay for any debts (i.e. to the coyote, or to people that lent him money to afford the migration cost). Their study also brings 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 there are other factors involved as well.

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. Guadalupe Vallejo Mora (2005) explains that once the “man of the house” leaves, women secure more room to be in control of the household. In addition, monetary remittances play a very important role in the improvement of women’s economic circumstances; which in consequence, enables women to move more freely in society and possibly even to be respected among their communities (Ramírez et al., 35).

In addition to monetary remittances, migration creates a flow of social remittances (Ramírez et al.). Social remittances are ideas, thoughts, feelings,

and values that migrants learn abroad and bring back into their original community. Social remittances are communicated when immigrants visit their communities, or contact their communities over the phone, letters, videos, etc. (Levitt, 1998). 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. Nevertheless, Peggy Levitt (1998) points out that Latinos "tended to shop with other Latinos and reported few social contacts with Anglos. They did not actively explore their new world because the structure of their lives did not bring them close enough to it" (931). Despite this observation, immigrants are still witnessing everyday life and relations among people that surround them in their new community, and perhaps this way, are learning about new ideas and customs that can later be transmitted to the sending community.

On the opposite end, some studies concluded that migration did not alter women's role in the sending communities and in fact, the separation of families sometimes even increased women's subordination to men. For example, Sarah Gammage (2003) argues that,

> domestic responsibilities in the reproductive sector may restrict the economic activities that women who are also care-providers can engage in, heightening their dependence on remittances and limiting the extent to which they may be able to secure economic well-being for themselves and their families (2)

In other words, Gammage 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. Migration and the reliance on remittances can adversely affect poverty, women and families left behind. 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 countries. Dependence is also risky for the family who stays in the sending community because as Martin notes, there is a possibility that over time migrants would get settled in the new community and lose contact with the sending community, reducing the amount of remittances sent back. 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).

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

> 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.

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 interviews (2003) of Guatemalan migrants living in Jupiter, Fl, 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 in one of the interviews, a man explains that many women think it is easy to make money in the U.S. so they t ake the money for granted. He continues describing that "they buy themselves things that aren't necessary and spend the money on parties or social gatherings." This view, whether true or not, gives us an insight into the possible mistrust that arises between partners that could potential further the patriarchal hierarchy in Guatemala.

Additionally, some researchers accentuate that even though women are indeed the recipients of monetary remittances, they only spend the money exactly how the migrant abroad tells her to. Even if women are indeed in control of the money, men are still making administrative decisions and controlling the large lumps 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 administrating 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 are subject to disapproval and marginalization. Guatemalans tend to have negative opinions about women 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, they 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' implications of female lead households in the minds of many Guatemalans. Also, Datta and McIlwaine observed that women faced discrimination in employment, for instance, a woman reported that she was fired as soon as her pregnancy started to show. This indicates that society still perceives female lead houses as an anomaly, and this limits the female scope of power within their own communities.

Case study: Guatemala

In order to really measure how much migration impacts women's role in Guatemala we must also take into consideration the context in which these believed changes are taking place. Migration is indeed a factor that influences gender relations in Guatemala, but many other factors are involved. The factors that must be taken into account when considering gender relations are levels of education; ethnicity; religion; union status; opportunities available in the cash economy; and crop production prevalence in the community (Carter, 2004). My paper argues that there is not a simple "yes or no" answer to the question: "Does migration and remittances change gender relationships in Guatemala?" 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 explains that ethnicity is also 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.

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 more husband's 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.

The case of Jacaltekos

In 2003, the OIM (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones) undertook a National Survey on Family Remittances in Guatemala. The survey calculated the impact of remittances in Guatemala on rural, urban and national level. According to the National Survey on Family Remittances, the total number of female headed households (61.2%) is higher than the total number of male headed households that receive remittances (38.8%) in Guatemala. The OIM also estimated that for the year 2003 near to 2 thousand million dollars would be injected into Guatemala through remittances. According to a special news report in Prensa Libre (Guatemala's leading newspaper) remittances are only behind coffee exports in the national revenue. That means that females, who are the principal recipients for remittances in most regions of Guatemala, are handling over 60% of an increasingly influential sector of the Guatemalan economy. Another important finding in the National Survey is that 75% of the household heads in Guatemala are the ones who decide how to spend the remittances (as opposed to joint decisions, or decisions made by migrants). Not only does this accentuate the importance of female roles in Guatemala's economy, but it also possibly contradicts the literature that argues that migration and remittances do not alter women's role in the household because it is the sender that generally decides how the money should be spent

The National Survey reveals that certain regions of Guatemala (Northwestern, Southwestern and Northern) seemed to have an equal number of male and female headed homes. According to the OIM this may be due to the

fact that many male migrants leave their wives with their parents or extended family, and do not send the monetary remittances directly to the women. It could also be the result of many contextual factors as discussed previously in this paper. Perhaps there is a possibility that these regions unlike other regions have generally less educated, more indigenous women (who tend to report more male dominance according to Carter's study). It could also be that the there are less cash economy opportunities for women in these areas.

Study Design for the future

I plan on studying the case of Jacaltenango, Huehuetenango. According to Palma and Molina, there is a large, mostly male (90%), mostly Jakalteco migrant community in Jupiter. This paper sets out to examine how migration has affected women's role and gender relations in Jacaltenango. I first plan on holding qualitative interviews with migrants in Jupiter to examine their perceptions of how their roles as decision makers changed (if at all) ever since they migrated. I later plan on interviewing Guatemalan wives that stayed at home, to test how they feel their role in their household changed overtime ever since the family member migrated.

Taking into consideration Carter's analysis of husbands' household authority in rural Guatemala, that is, taking into account the factors mentioned above (education, ethnicity, religion, union status, cash economy, and crop production) I hypothesize that although migration will slightly reduce female subordination in Jacaltenango, other factors will still overwhelm the factor of migration and women's role will still be subordinate to men.

Conclusions

The aim of this research paper was to examine whether migration has impacted women's role, responsibilities and participation within their own households and community in Guatemala. Like the debate in the literature reflects, there is no easy answer to this question. Migration definitely changes the structure of households in the sending community because family members are absent; however this does not necessarily mean that gender relations are altered or that wives gain independence from their husbands (assuming that they were dependent on them to begin with).

In the case of Guatemala, studies demonstrated that among houses with migrants there was a large amount of female leadership; and that most recipients of monetary remittances were indeed women. However, there are other factors that might continue to subordinate women and give continuance to a patriarchal hierarchical system in Guatemala.

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