

...Everything Went Crazy: Gender Roles and Autonomy among Wives of Returned Migrants

... todo se volvió loco: cambios y continuidades en los roles de género y autonomía de mujeres pareja de migrantes retornados

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes changes and continuities in gender relationships and autonomy among wives of returned migrants in the city of Teocelo, Veracruz, Mexico. For that purpose, we used a qualitative method, specifically, the analysis of life stories as reported by seven local women. The departure, absence, and return of a migrant husband entails a series of changes in the practices and subjectivities of wives. These changes have to be negotiated with the returnee to maintain the couple relationship and family ties. The present study stresses the importance of continuing research on migration using a gender perspective to properly acknowledge and evaluate the experience of women married to migrant returnees. The present analysis seeks to contribute to gender-sensitive studies on the phenomenon of migration.

Keywords: 1. migration, 2. wives of migrants, 3. couples, 4. Teocelo, Veracruz, 5. México.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza cambios y continuidades en las relaciones de género y en la autonomía de mujeres esposas de migrantes retornados de la localidad de Teocelo, Veracruz, México. Para tal objetivo se optó por el uso de metodología cualitativa, específicamente el análisis de trayectorias de vida de siete mujeres de dicha localidad. La partida, ausencia y el retorno del cónyuge implica una serie de cambios en las prácticas y subjetividades de las mujeres. Dichos cambios tienen que ser negociados con el retornado para mantener la relación de pareja y los vínculos familiares. Se concluye la importancia de seguir investigando el fenómeno migratorio con perspectiva de género para visibilizar y valorar la experiencia de las mujeres parejas de migrantes, en ocasiones denominadas como “las que se quedan”. El presente análisis pretende abonar a los estudios con perspectiva de género sobre el fenómeno migratorio.

Palabras clave: 1. migración, 2. mujeres esposas de migrantes, 3. pareja, 4. Teocelo, Veracruz, 5. México.

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INTRODUCTION

Jeez! When he came back, everything went crazy because it is not the same as being accustomed to being alone, because he has arrived, and because it feels as if you are locked up, you can't go anywhere anymore because [the husband says] 'where are you going, what are you going to do, who are you going with, don't be late.'

(María, personal communication, August 10, 2016)

The previous testimony is part of the experience of María, one of seven women who participated in the present study. Her words reveal the change she and the rest of the interviewed women faced due to the return of their husbands, a process of readjustment, and negotiation in the couple.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the changes and continuities in the couple's relationship, gender roles, and the autonomy of the wives after the migratory experience of their returned husbands. The approach was based on the analysis of the experiences of seven women from the municipality of Teocelo, in Veracruz, Mexico.

Until the 1990s, the main activities in the region were related to the growing of coffee. Before the coffee boom, there were different haciendas in the area whose main activities were sugar cane growing and stockbreeding. According to Córdova Plaza (2005), the area began growing coffee in the early 1890s. However, different crises in coffee production, exacerbated by the demise of the Mexican Coffee Institute in 1989 and the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement, forced the population to consider migration as a possibility to improve their lives (Ibarra, 2003).

As a result of the decline of coffee growing in the region, recent generations gave up the hope of subsisting on the activity and began to seek employment in other sectors and see migration as an option to improve their quality of life. Currently, although coffee is still the main crop, most of the population is employed in the services sector. Only one of the husbands of the interviewed women was an agricultural worker, while the rest were drivers or construction workers.

In recent years, return migration has been taking place. Among the factors behind the increase in this flow were increased deportations and other forms of forced return, unemployment, and deteriorating living conditions due to the economic recession in the United States. According to census data presented by the National Population Council (CONAPO), the number of men and women born in Mexico who returned from the United States increased from 267 000 people between 1995 and 2000 to 824 000 in the five-year period from 2005 to 2010 (CONAPO, 2014). Of the population who returned in 2012, 49.5 percent did so to rural areas.

According to information published by CONAPO concerning the calculation of migration intensity in 2010, the percentage of households receiving remittances and the percentage of

households headed by migrants who returned from the United States decreased; on the other hand, the percentage of return migrants increased (CONAPO, 2014). Specifically in Veracruz, the average percentage of households including a return migrant increased from 0.2 from 1995-2000 to 1.9 percent in the 2005-2010 period. The town of Teocelo was particularly characterized by a low migration index, both in 2000 and 2010. However, this does not mean that the migratory phenomenon is imperceptible in the locality.

Reviewed studies focusing on return migration address the issue from the perspective of the reintegration of returned migrants (Gandini, Lozano, & Gaspar, 2015), but they fail to account for the implications of this reinsertion to family and couple dynamics. The present article accounts for the latter issue.

I consider that return migration has a significant impact on the reconfiguration of the couple on gender roles, and on the women's autonomy, given that both men and women—migrants or otherwise—experience a haphazard search for resources, not only economic ones, to adapt to the new situation. The wives of returned migrants lived new experiences while their husbands were away; therefore, the return process becomes a moment of contrast since relationships cannot be rekindled from the point where they were before the husbands left. Frida, one of the seven women interviewed, narrates that: "Logically, you change, your way of thinking changes with all of this, and when they come back, it can't be the same ..." (Frida, personal communication, August 8, 2016).

Thus, with the return of their husbands, the women faced a reconfiguration of their everyday life and subjectivity. In this regard, one of the main questions motivating the present study was to analyze the changes in gender, couple relationship, and autonomy roles and whether these changes persisted after the husband's return. Obviously, returnees also changed because they learned, lived, and felt new feelings, so they return as something different from what they used to be.

More specifically, I asked myself if migratory processes disrupt traditional gender roles, the couple's relationship, and women's autonomy. I was also interested in finding out in which cases and on what factors the continuities and ruptures in these aspects depended, and how women expanded their margins of freedom without necessarily making radical changes in their gender roles.

To explore the experiences of the women and their partners, I used a qualitative methodology, specifically the life-trajectory method, which allows for the systematic introduction of change and temporality of social action into the research process, not only as an analytic dimension but as an articulating axis of the research process (Rivera, 2012, p. 457). This study was intended as an exploratory and descriptive endeavor, which is why I worked with a small group of women.

I used the snowball technique to put together the group of seven women who participated in the research. From the beginning, my intention was to work with women who had experienced the migration and the return of their husbands. In order to compare what changed

and what remained, one of the selection criteria was that the study participant's husbands had returned and stayed for at least two years.

Thus, it was possible to reconstruct, using semi-structured interviews, a period from before the husband's departure to two years after their return. This exercise consisted not only in reconstructing, historically and linearly, a certain period of their lives, but gradually making sense of an experience that was often difficult to face, and in some cases, not even previously discussed. I would now like to introduce the seven women who were part of the investigation.

Table I. General information on women who were part of the investigation.

Name ²	Age	Number of children	Educational level	Years since return	Occupation
Frida	34	1	Secondary	4	Household/retailer
Rosaura	36	2	High School	9	Retailer
Leonora	38	1	Studied education science for four years	10 ³	Household/retailer
Xóchitl	40	2	Secondary	9	Household/hairdresser
Eréndira	43	3	Studied the first semesters of physics	8	Household/seamstress
María	44	3	Primary	9	Household
Libertad	51	1	Secondary	13	Household/retailer

Source: Prepared by the author based on semi-structured interviews, August-December 2016.

As shown by the analysis of couple relationships, gender roles and women's autonomy play a fundamental role in the number of sons and daughters that they have. I was also interested in analyzing what happens after the husband's return, and so I decided to work with women whose husbands had returned a few years before.

MALE MIGRATION: AUTONOMY AND GENDER ROLES IN THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

The impact of migration on gender relations has been addressed by different authors (D'Aubeterre, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Chávez (2013) has shown that one of the

² All names have been changed.

³ Leonora's husband was in the United States when the investigation was conducted. He has migrated and returned several times.

consequences of international migration for men is a change in what they define as the gender identity of women as a migrant's couple (2013, p. 199). According to Chávez (2013), this change is mainly motivated by the fact that women leave the private space that they traditionally occupy in a public space. Based on the results of the study, gender relationships were more likely to change than gender identities; the gender-based division of certain roles and tasks was blurred, but the mandates governing what men and women should be, their gender identities, were not seriously modified or challenged.

For the author, men's migration makes women experience 'forced' emancipation, a transition that is often sudden because the women and their families need to adapt to the situation, a new life without the physical presence of the migrant husband; the return of the husband represents, for women, the return to their traditional role. When this is not the case, the changes modify family dynamics, and sometimes there are crises and conflicts within the family.

About the analyzed experiences, it could be said that the migration of the husband created a series of changes that modified and restructured the subjectivities of both partners. The following sections will describe how the analysis of the experiences of women who are married to migrants can identify the impact of traditional gender roles on the relationship with the couple and the possibilities of expanding the women's margin of autonomy and freedom.

Thus, considering the migratory process from a gender perspective allows for the visualization of women as a heterogeneous group on which migration has different impacts (Rosas Mujica, 2006). For Rosas Mujica, there is a clear relationship between autonomy, gender roles, and migration. Male migration becomes a resource that allows women to participate in decision-making. According to the author, women's administration of the money sent by the migrants can become a vehicle to their autonomy since it provides them with the possibility to manage and make decisions about how to spend such income (Rosas Mujica, 2006).

Among authors who suggest that male migration can facilitate women's development, Arias (2013) states that the greatest impact of male migration on women is increased self-confidence due to closer links with the family and the community, as well as greater freedom: In this regard, the absence of men seems to have very positive effects in terms of attributes such as self-esteem, autonomy, and independence among women (Arias, 2013, p. 236).

On the other hand, less optimistic research suggests that women's autonomy as migrants' wives is limited since gender division is still present and limiting their decision-making power (Casique, Salgado de Snyder, & Bojórquez, 2009). In addition, different control mechanisms persist over migrant's wives (García, Ruiz Pimentel, & Ruiz Vallejo, 2011).

The experiences of the seven women who participated in the present study reveal how these two positions are articulated. The men's migration had the effect of modifying gender roles and increasing women's autonomy. However, these changes and transformations were

not intentional at first, and although gender roles became more flexible and, as we will see, women's autonomy was strengthened, the most important thing for them was to maintain their relationship and their status as wives, so they always acted within this framework of action. Thus, we can suggest that the seven women always tried to act within limits, although trying to stretch them as much as possible.

The concept of autonomy was central in the present study. As a first step, autonomy could be defined as the freedom of action of women to make decisions concerning their lives and to participate in different spaces with their couple, their family, and their community. Economic independence becomes an important resource for women to decide how to spend their income (Deere & León, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011, González & Salles, 1995; Srilatha, 1997). An important fact is that, during the absence of their husbands, all the interviewed women materialized or strengthened projects that had to do with generating their own income. This fact seemed to give them confidence for negotiating roles and tasks acquired due to the absence of their husbands.

Casique associates autonomy directly with a woman's degree of decision-making power at a given moment (Casique, 2001, p. 13); the author states that the most important thing is for women to be able to make any decision without requiring the consent of their husband (Casique, 2001, p. 14). However, as Tepichin (2009) points out, this idea of nullifying the role of the husband in the relationship does not seem appropriate to address the exploration of gender equity issues (p. 116).

In this way, the analysis of autonomy, especially in the couple relationship, rather than focusing on observing who decides what, should show how such participation occurs. In this regard, Tepichin suggests that the concept of autonomy allows for an exploration of women's participation in decisions, which does not automatically assume a pre-established model of empowerment as desirable (2009, p. 116). Therefore, to approach the analysis of autonomy, this article adheres to Tepichin's proposal on the observation of the processes involved in women's participation.

I also considered autonomy as a process, a construction. I think that seeing autonomy as such helps to bear in mind that autonomy is constantly changing due to different factors: life cycle, number of children, marital status, and economic, political, and social conditions, among others. Thus, the women who participated in the present study had some autonomy before the departure of their husbands, an autonomy built under certain conditions. During the husband's absence, the period in which major changes in this regard occurred, they seemed to have made progress in such construction; the progress was shaken by the return, but as we shall see, it was possible to readjust it.

To conclude this section, I should point out what is meant by talking about the *couple*. In the first place, the couple could be said to be a complex unit in which two people with common interests and affections are involved (Hernández, 2016: 35). In other words, a couple requires the willingness of the people involved to build a bond, undertake a shared

life project, and undergo an arduous accommodation of individual identities (Barros García, Conejero Ross, Edo Badía, Gil Hernández, & Rebelo Honorio, n/d, p. 25). Thus, the couple shares a life project, a sexual life, and they remain in that relationship on the basis of conviction and will of their own.

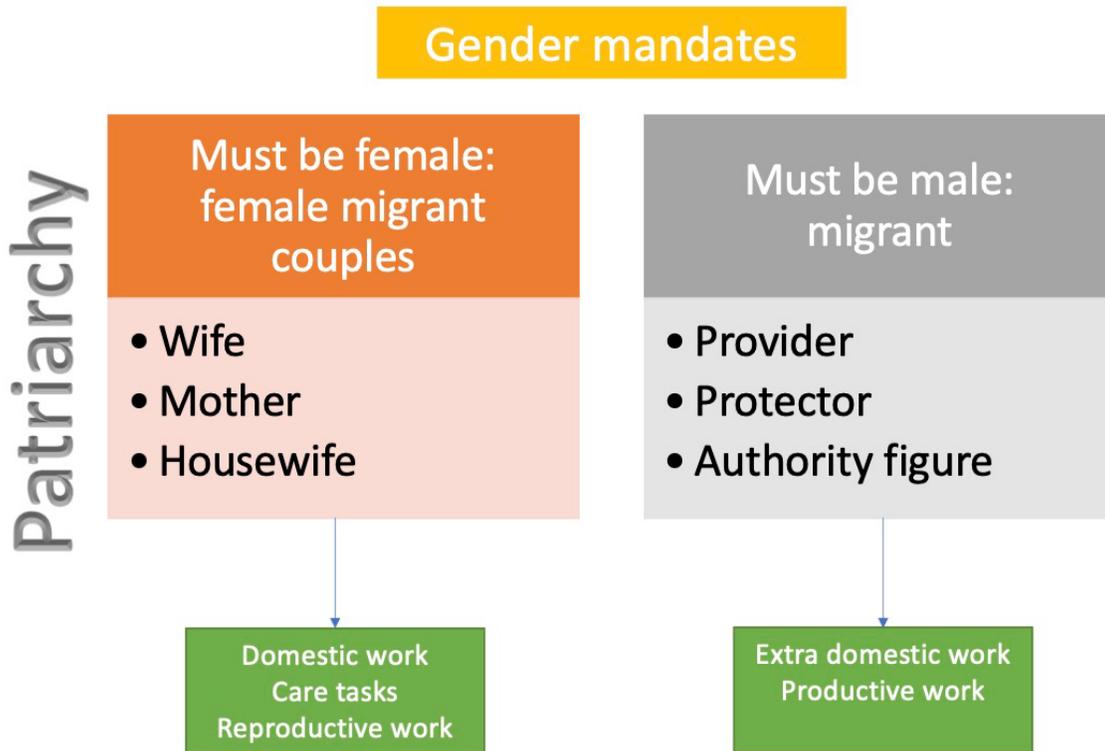
The study included women in heterosexual relationships whose roles were socially and culturally defined. The concept of gender refers to the sociocultural construction of the feminine and the masculine. Thus, this concept refers to the set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices that society attributes to men or women and often serves as the basis for unequal power relationships (Scott, 1996).

Thus, behavioral patterns, roles, norms, and identities are defined for each member of the couple. In order to maintain this differentiation, the roles, traits, and tasks of each member are established according to their gender in the form of norms and mandates that refer to the masculine and the feminine, conditioning the behavior of men and women (Hernández, 2016, p. 38).

When constructed, such norms vary depending on the context, place, and historical moment. These mandates, in turn, will be legitimized and transmitted by community members themselves. The present article shows how these commands are obeyed by the couple, but we will also see how they adapt or modify them.

This investigation revealed that women seem to take on the task of looking after the family and the house, and they seem to agree with the mandate of being wives, mothers, and housewives. However, as will be described below, migration seems to have facilitated a change and relaxation of these mandates and roles. In this regard, different studies agree that migration entails a renegotiation of gender roles leading to a restructuring of gender asymmetries (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011).

Figure I. Expectations for males and females in the town of Teocelo



Source: Elaborated by the author.

To fully understand the relationships between migration and what goes on within the couple, the migratory phenomenon must be examined using a gender perspective, since gender affects all aspects of the migratory experience, from the decision of who should migrate to the amount and frequency of remittances sent and their impact on the country of origin (Petrozziello, 2012, p. 24).

WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION IN THE COUPLE

As stated in the introduction, we used life trajectories to analyze the impact of the migration experience. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to recover these women's experiences, their learning, and the knowledge that they obtained. The chronological cut was made from the moment when the decision of the husband's departure was made up to the present time, years after his return. Therefore, the results section will refer to the moments of departure, absence, and return.

This section will also discuss how the decision to migrate was made, especially highlighting the role of women in the relationship. Although migration is seen as a family strategy, it does not necessarily mean that the whole family decides who, when, and for how long the person will leave. According to the operating gender mandates—internalized and reproduced by the women and their husbands—there are decisions in which men become

involved more than women, and vice versa. In this way, the decision to migrate most often falls on the men, probably because it is a strategy to provide for the family, and the role of supplier is one of the male mandates (Rosas Mujica, 2006).

To better understand the participation of women in the decision around the husband's migration, their situations, context, and other elements will be analyzed to reveal their relative participation.

In the case of María, her husband worked in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico before migrating to the United States, while she continued living in Teocelo. This circumstance seemed to make it easier for him to opt for migration unilaterally, without considering her. There were other women who participated in their husbands' decision to migrate, but they did so in a limited way. In these cases, the decision had already been made by the husbands, although they had the opportunity to state their opinion. However, there was no room to negotiate or discuss the decision their husbands had already made.

Other women, on the other hand, were consulted by their husbands and were able to express their opinion. In these cases, it seemed that the men had been seeking the opportunity to migrate, and when the opportunity came up, they had already made progress in delineating specific ways to migrate to the United States. The three women in this situation presented no objections. Migration was not a new alternative and was somewhat common in their community. Thus, when they were told: "there is an opportunity [to migrate]," they were not surprised.

Well, that was the concern, all right? It was his concern because he made very little money over here, and he began to say 'I want to go, I want to do something ...' Well, at first I was very afraid, like any family: what if something bad happens to him or he forgets about us and doesn't come back. And yes, sometimes I would say: Did you think about it? But he really wanted it, and then I began to think that something could happen, and I said to myself: 'Look, I would have gone' I mean, yes, there was support, but fear always was present, it always existed (Rosaura, personal communication, August 18, 2016).

In sum, it could be said that women had little participation concerning the decision to migrate. Although some of them expressed their disagreement concerning their husband's migration, they knew that their departure was imminent, and they valued remaining at peace with their partners, as Rosaura put it, and maintaining the bonds with their children and marital commitment.

The decision to return

Another moment of analysis in the experiences of the seven women was their husbands' return. As we explained in the previous section when making decisions as a couple, there are cases in which one makes the decision, and the other accepts it, as well as cases in which decisions were shared.

When faced with the decision to return from the United States, the studied couples considered how much the goals and projects established before the husband's migration had been accomplished, for example, how much their household had been improved. On the other hand, the physical presence of the spouse was more necessary for them when their children were teenagers, so that when they were older, they began to ask their husbands to come back: "In fact, on the phone, I would tell him to come back" (Xóchitl, personal communication, September 20, 2016).

Decreased work opportunities and, in some cases, outright unemployment in the United States, as well as the fear of being deported, were also important factors in the decision to return to Mexico. To better understand how women influenced the return of their husbands, it should be mentioned that telephone communications, and in one case video calls, played an important role during the absence. In this regard, research suggests that communication is used as a control mechanism by the husbands (García, Ruiz Pimentel, & Ruiz Vallejo, 2011); however, the interviewed women told me how they sought and also promoted constant communication, since not only did they keep their husbands aware of what was happening with their families and the community, they also negotiated their new roles.

More than measuring participation, what I want to show is why each woman participated in the way she did. Xóchitl, like María and Rosaura, tried to persuade their husband to return. One of the main reasons was that their children were about to enter adolescence. She was concerned that, at this stage, they could defy her authority because she was "not their dad" and that it would be harder to control them. When her husband left, her children were 7 and 8 years old, and when he returned, they were 10 and 11. Xóchitl narrates her experience as follows:

Well, they [her children] were also very eager to see him, because it was happiness, and also for me, because the children grow older and you feel more responsible if something happens to them, it was beautiful when he came back (Xóchitl, personal communication, November 2, 2016).

The situation was similar for María. She also stated that the main reason why she wanted her husband to come back was that her children were growing, and she felt that responsibility increased. As can be observed, during the absence of their husbands, several women felt more responsible for the well-being and protection of their children. Although, on the one hand, most of the women reported feeling confident about caring for and being responsible for their children, the situation seemed to change as they reached adolescence. In some ways, it was assumed that the authority of the family was the father and that during that period, his presence in the family was more needed.

Unlike Xóchitl and María, Eréndira preferred not to become involved in her husband's decision to return. She had an important role when she and her husband opted for his migrating, but her involvement made her feel guilty for his leaving. For that reason, she decided that he should decide on when to return:

He had not planned how long he would be there; he would call and see the girls and say 'I miss them so much, I am very used to them, I'd better come back, what do you think?' And I's say: 'It's up to you.' And he decided to come back, but it was not like he called and said 'Hey, I bought the ticket.' No, when he told me, it was because he was already in Mexico (María, personal communication, November 15, 2016).

Libertad was in a similar position. She decided not to suggest or ask her husband to return (he had already migrated twice) since she thought that if she convinced him to come back, he would regret it, and she would feel guilty and also regretful.

As can be observed in the narrative of these experiences, the participation of women in the decision to return depended on different factors. In some cases, the women actively tried to persuade their husbands to return, while in other cases, they decided not to become involved with the decision. In this regard, Tepichin (2009) suggests that autonomy refers to freedom of choice and capacity to participate. Such capacity represents their genuine opportunities, whether they take them or not. From this perspective, the fact that Eréndira and Libertad chose not to participate does not necessarily mean that they did not have the possibility and capacity to do so, but rather that they chose to respect their husband's decision.

At the other end is Frida, in whose case the decision was made by only one member of the couple. Her husband decided to return to Mexico without notifying her. She had not heard from him in a while. One afternoon after work, as she was picking her son up at her sister's, she told him that her husband had already picked him up. Frida could not believe the news, she went home and found her husband. For her, that moment was one of mixed emotions: the joy of the return, but also the disappointment of the abandonment she experienced during the years when he stopped acting as a supplier and active part of the family and the couple. As she put it: "One always expects them to come back, all the plans are for when he does, and I, although I knew nothing about him for a long time, somehow I knew he'd come back one day" (Frida, personal communication, November 5, 2016).

In all cases, the return meant a moment of uncertainty for the women. On the one hand, they experienced feelings of happiness due to the expected reunion with their partner. On the other hand, they had doubts about the future of the family, the couple, and themselves. They wondered whether things would go back to the way they were before he migrated, whether they would have to devote their time only to housework and leave their businesses, what would be their role in the family from that moment on? How would the couple relationship readjust after this experience?

I had to get used to say where I was going and when I was coming back because he asked, he wanted to know what I was going to do. He would also say, 'Don't go, I am right here,' and to this day, it's hard for me. I sometimes tell him, 'I don't have to tell you, I'm going here or I'm going there because you taught me that I was alone and now I can't leave for some time because I'm already thinking that you are here and I have to come quickly, because otherwise, you will be thinking,' I haven't gotten used to it until now (María, personal communication, November 3, 2016).

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María's testimony reveals the change she faced with her husband when he came back. Gender mandates became evident: he had the most authority in the family and over María, and therefore she felt limited. However, María's submission to these mandates was not complete inasmuch as she expresses her dissatisfaction.

Libertad: an example of the negotiation of changes and continuities

To better understand what happened with the return of the husbands, how the role of women within the relationship was modified, and the roles within the relationship, it should be remembered that any human relationship involves a balance of power (Scott, 2000), and that, in the case of male-female relationships, asymmetry is even more marked because men are socially and culturally legitimized to exercise power.

The women who participated in the study had realized that if they wanted to continue conducting activities outside their homes, such as being employed, they had to negotiate with their partners to maintain the changes that had taken place during the absence. For Covarrubias (2018), negotiation has to do with maintaining or giving up a certain amount of power, and negotiation is essential when analyzing women's autonomy because it reflects the capacity and freedom to implement strategies and resources to make agreements with the couple. Thus, during negotiation, different mechanisms will be deployed to maintain and resist power: coercion, influence, authority, and manipulation (Covarrubias, 2018).

In the analyzed cases, influence was often used as a resource during negotiations. Women provided their husbands with reasons to continue carrying out activities outside their home. They argued that maintaining their businesses allowed the family to have additional economic resources and that after the return of their husbands, their businesses could become the main source of income while their husbands found a job.

The success of the negotiation depended to a great extent on the use of the resources and autonomy built during the absence of their husbands. It was a negotiation process in which they decided to yield or decrease activities such as working outside their homes. A number of studies suggest that migrant return represents a "setback" in terms of autonomy for women (Chávez, 2013). However, among the women interviewed, we could attest a negotiation with the patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988); these women gave up activities strategically, which means that they did not passively return to their situation prior to their husband's migration: as Scott (2000) states, resistance persists in any power relationship.

The negotiation process between Libertad and her husband illustrates this process. During the absence of her husband, she took over the management of the family's coffee farm. Assuming this task made her recognize and value her own skills as an administrator:

I felt I learned many things. When he left, I learned many things that I used to leave to him; or that were practically for men. After that, my son began to help me out, and we supported each other... Yes, it did help that he left; it hurt, but it did help me because I learned to support myself and choose the things I had to choose on my own because

I always asked for his opinion, and if he hadn't left, I don't know, I would have taken up church because I felt alone and I was alone, and I did what I wanted, and it also helped me to learn how to clear out, because I felt that before he left, I was like a little authoritarian, and when he left, I was less authoritarian. I began to think about all of this since he left (Libertad, personal communication, September 14, 2016).

This testimony allows for a new analysis of gender mandates. In the case of Libertad, as with the other women, a sexual division of labor is still present. There are things that men are supposed to do and things that women are supposed to do. Thus, before the migration, the administration of the farm, a resource to provide for the family, corresponded to the husband. In general, when the husband's physical presence is not available for such tasks, the person in charge must be another male member of the family (Deere & León, 2000). In the case of Libertad, since her son was studying when her husband left, she decided to take over the farm.

On the other hand, Libertad's account also shows how the absence of her husband generated the need to feel accompanied and contained, which led her to identify in certain spaces where she could compensate for the need. Thus, the period of absence was a time when, apart from being involved in other roles and activities, she allowed to reflect on herself. In sum, she was able to recognize herself as a woman capable of living her own life.

The second time that he left, I took refuge in the church, I felt lonely, and my son was also going to clubs with his girlfriend. I started to go to church, I took up a catechism group, and still teach them; and then I began to read at church during mass, and I also joined the chorus, like I had my time over there, and it wasn't this [referring to the house and the store] (Libertad, personal communication, September 14, 2016).

As can be appreciated from this account, women's needs change according to their life cycle. In the case of Libertad, the fact that her son was now older and required less attention left her with a feeling of loneliness and in command of her free time.

Her active participation in the church was a source of conflict when her husband returned. He did not agree with her spending so much time in such activities, but Libertad had found company by participating in the church and a feeling of well-being, so she was firm in her decision to continue with these activities:

He came back, and he didn't like the fact that I spent time outside, but I didn't say I was going to quit: no, I said 'on the contrary, I should bring him closer to God because if it has helped me, it can also help him feel good.' And I began to take him to mass, and he does go to mass every week. Now he says, 'I won't say a thing, if you want to go to the groups go ahead, but don't involve me in your stuff.' And right now, I'm doing it (Libertad, personal communication, September 14, 2016).

This couple reached an agreement in which she could continue participating in the church and involving her husband in some ways. It is important to recognize that negotiation processes are not necessarily continuous, and that agreements are constantly renegotiated.

SHAKING OFF GENDER MANDATES AND ROLES

In this section, I will analyze how different factors have combined and modified gender roles and mandates in the everyday practices of women and their partners.

One of the initial assumptions of the present study was that gender roles are disrupted by the migratory experience. Returned men and women who did not migrate faced new situations that challenged their traditional roles. On the one hand, in the United States, men had to look after themselves and carry out activities that were in charge of their wives back home, i.e., cooking, cleaning, washing, or buying groceries. Meanwhile, women took the role of providers and, in some cases, heads of family.

One of the most important changes for women was leaving the domestic environment. Those who started a business usually did so in the municipal market, a social and commercial space in which there is a continuous flow of interactions among the community, which forced them to interact and negotiate with different actors. Others became involved in religious activities, such as raising funds in their community; others joined political groups and organized support groups.

Therefore, women who began to participate in the public space had to negotiate in a way that did not confront them directly with their husbands, but allowed them to expand their roles as housewives, mothers, and wives as much as possible, as well as experiencing new ones.

Tension emerged when the husbands returned; as roles readjusted, men tried to regain their role as an authority in the family. Some of them indicated that, after coming back, their appreciation for the work done by their wives had increased, although this was not necessarily reflected by their increased participation in such tasks. Women, for their part, resisted the possibility that their traditional roles became as rigid as before migration. They tried to keep the new tasks, roles, and responsibilities they acquired, even if it meant more work. By exercising their autonomy, understood as their freedom to choose and participate, they managed to widen the margins of their roles and mandates within the couple.

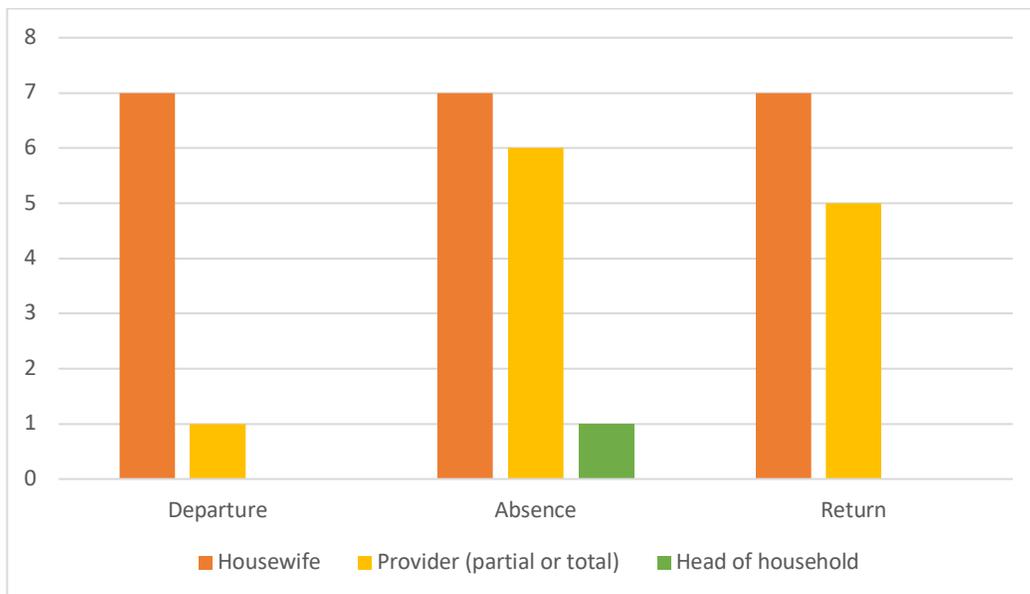
When their husbands returned, some women worked outside their home, so in the first days, their husbands had to take on certain errands and domestic work. This situation was often short-lived since husbands almost immediately tried to regain their social, family, and community networks, become employed, and resume their role as providers as soon as possible. Rosa tells it in the following way:

At the moment you had to adapt to it, because you get used to it, to practically being only you; but I think we were not [separated] for too long, because he arrived and about two or three days later they came calling for him, there was a bus without a driver, and he knew how to drive it, so he went to work, and the buses left early and returned late (Rosaura, personal communication, October 22, 2016).

As with Rosaura's husband, others tried to return to work quickly, most of them by retaking their old jobs. Regarding this last point, the case of María's husband, Roberto, should be mentioned. After Roberto returned, he was unemployed for a few months, and she became responsible for supporting her family, so she decided to go out and find a job. During this period—which was brief, because he quickly found a job and the situation changed—he "helped" María with some household chores, but he did it knowing that it was temporary, that is, he would not take it as part of his responsibilities in the home (Vélez, 2012; Covarrubias, 2018; Lázaro Castellanos, Zapata Martelo, & Martínez Corona, 2007).

Figure 1 shows some of the roles assumed by the women as a result of the migration experience. It should be made clear that the role of a housewife has to do with domestic work, whereas the role of provider refers to partially or totally supporting the family with an income. Therefore, as family heads, women are expected to take on the responsibility of providing food, shelter, clothing, education, and recreation to their family members (Suárez & Polanco, 2011, p. 17). They are also responsible for designing different strategies for the well-being of the family, and, at the same time, they are recognized as an authority within their community. In sum, family heads are expected to manage and support the family (Hernández, 2010).

Figure 1. Roles performed by women during the different moments of the migratory experience



Source: Adapted by the author based on elaborated life trajectories.

As can be appreciated, the role of all women before, during, and after the migration of their husbands corresponds to the traditional role of a housewife. The role of provider refers to situations where, as a result of personal businesses or extra-domestic work, people partially or completely take care of domestic expenses. The role of female family head refers to the responsibility of providing and exercising authority over the children and their care.

For the interviewed women, their income *complemented* their husbands'. In this regard, Arias (2013) argues that, although male migration fosters higher participation of women in wage labor, this has not changed the division of labor within the domestic environment; women often continue carrying out all traditional household chores (Arias, 2013, p. 235). On this point, it should be added that of all the women interviewed, only Leonora reported that domestic work was shared between her and her partner, although it should be mentioned that, in this case, Leonora considered this as a "help" from her husband (and she "helps" with family income). She attributed the migratory experience to his decision to become involved in domestic work: "I think that because he had to be there alone and do everything by himself, in that sense he does help me ..." (Leonora, personal communication, August 10th, 2016).

Contrary to most of the interviewed women, Leonora considered that her partner's return would represent less work than during her absence because she will have his support:

Now that he's coming, far from saying 'Oh, he's coming, I have to iron the clothes, I have to wash for him, and I need to spend more time,' no. On the contrary, because he irons his clothes and that is how he takes care of what he has to do and so on. I tell you because people have told me 'Just wait till he comes and you'll see' and I say 'No, because he helps me with that. What he can do he does, and let's say if he does not, for instance, he didn't put the clothes in the washing machine because he forgot, he's not one to say 'go, wash my clothes', no, he takes the clothes and puts them in the machine... And I'm telling you, I think that's because he has lived alone and not like others who sometimes, for example, their mother did everything for them and then their wives, and that is what makes people who are elsewhere, who go out to work, value more what you do as a wife, as a mother (Leonora, personal communication, October 1, 2016).

Leonora describes a not uncommon type of relationship in the community, a relationship in which domestic chores are shared; however, people warn her that she will have less time with the return of her husband. She attributes the difference in her relationship to the fact that her husband has lived alone in the United States.

Concerning this last point, at least three of the husbands who migrated reported that, in fact, during their time in the United States, they themselves took on tasks their partners did in their place of origin (such as washing, cooking, cleaning, making purchases, managing expenses, etc.), but after returning to Mexico, none of them actively carried out domestic work. Although the burden of domestic work was acknowledged when the men had carried out these activities, this did not necessarily imply a change in the distribution of tasks back at their homes.

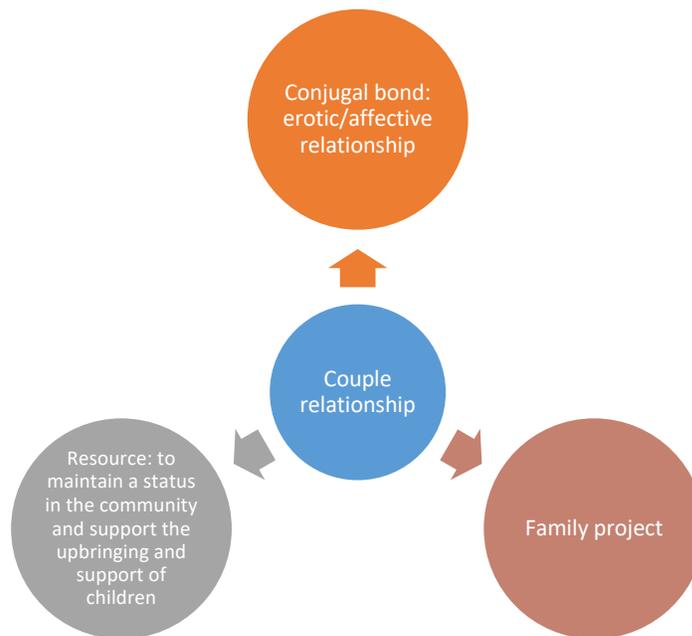
The similarities between Leonor's and Eréndira's experiences suggest that the changes have to do with the flexibility of their couple relationships. It should also be pointed out that, in both cases, these women had higher education, which is why education is likely an important factor, a resource or tool that has enabled them to experience relationships where their roles are more flexible.

COUPLE ADJUSTMENTS AFTER MIGRATION

As we have seen so far, the fact that the husband was physically absent did not mean that the couple relationship remained at a standstill. As Zapata and Suárez (2012) state, living in the same house is only one way to organize conjugality (Zapata & Suárez, 2012, p. 54). With the migration, the couple was reorganized to preserve the bond of marriage as well as possible (Clairgue Caizero, 2012).

For the interviewed women, a couple relationship is important because it is a relationship of love, care, and affection in which they share an active sexual life. On the other hand, the couple plays an essential role in carrying out the family project since it is a common project. Finally, they considered the couple as a resource that can be used as support in different ways. The following is a diagram (figure 2) to illustrate how these women conceive a couple relationship.

Figure 2. A proposed scheme on the role of couples in women's lives.



Source: Elaborated by the author.

Some of the interviewed women expressed uncertainty concerning the departure of their husbands because they feared abandonment, as described by Sevillano Bravo and Escobar Serrano (2011): "When a separation occurs in conjugal couples, the fear, anxiety, and doubts associated with cultural beliefs prescribing how men and women should act in an erotic/affective relationship become particularly evident" (2011, p. 230).

Five of the interviewed women reported that one of the things to expect when men migrated was abandonment, affairs, or that husbands had another couple in the United States. This was a fear migrant men apparently did not have, since women stayed in the house owned

by their husbands, with their sons and daughters, and kept depending on the remittances sent by men. In addition, the family and the community exercised control over the women's love life.

Thus, for the seven women, it was important to maintain communication with their husbands because they felt that communication guaranteed the permanence of the conjugal and family bond. In turn, the relationship was also a resource for women (Martínez, 2010); either because the separation entailed becoming divorced or separated women, because their heritage and that of their sons and daughters (the house) was owned by their husbands, or because their sons and daughters could have a father figure.

This can help to understand the experiences of Frida and María. Frida decided to continue in the relationship with her husband after he failed to communicate and send money for several years. During his absence, she strengthened her own capacities to act as the head of the household and be responsible for supporting and looking after her son; she acquired land and built a home.

For her part, María provided for her family for some time when her husband stopped communicating and sending money. When he got back in touch and confirmed his commitment to providing for his family, María agreed to leave her paid job to take care of her children. In other words, even in circumstances in which these women acknowledged their partners' unwillingness to carry on with the family and conjugal plan, they decided not to leave the relationship.

Finally, it should be highlighted that the couple relationship is also modified over time, depending on the life cycle of both partners and their experiences. In this way, as has been shown, the migratory experience was a turning point in the relationship. One of the most important consequences is that, when certain tasks were shared, certain roles became more flexible.

CONCLUSIONS

This article should contribute to the discussion and analysis of the impact of international male migration on their female counterparts who stay in their places of origin—referring to them as "those who stay behind" presupposes a passive role and reinforces the active role of the migrant. The reconstructed experiences revealed strategies, experiences, learning, and resources that were built, appropriated, and used to face a new and challenging situation.

I would like to close with a brief reflection on the use of women's time because that can also help to understand changes and continuities in the couple after the migration experience. For that purpose, I wish to return to the experience of Xóchitl, who realized that the absence of her husband allowed her to re-distribute her time. What caught my attention was that both she and the rest of the women decided to use that time for projects that, although beneficial

to the family, made them protagonists and needed them to modify certain tasks and roles associated with gender mandates.

Thus, several of them decided to resume or realize projects that they had postponed: they took actions related to generating their own income, such as starting a business, learning a trade, or working outside their home. From the outset, it could be said that the choice of using their time for these activities placed them in a role that they had not previously played: as suppliers.

On the one hand, it should be mentioned that the mere presence or physical absence of the spouses was in itself a fundamental factor in the reconfiguration of the use of their time, which led them to become involved in other activities and roles that were somehow outside the traditional framework. The women mentioned that it was not until their spouse left that they realized how much time they spent on "looking after" them. In this way, the absence allowed them to have more free time to devote to other activities, as well as having more freedom to make some decisions.

On the other hand, the role played by the women's life cycle and their family's must also be taken into account. In this regard, it was not the same experience for those who had to stay in their place of origin with children between 1 and 5 years of age as for those who could have their older children help them.

Thus, the return becomes a moment of tension and negotiation. The return of the husbands tested the strength and autonomy that these women had developed during the absence. They also needed to deploy different resources to try and improve their lives, maintain certain changes, and preserve the balance of their families.

Translator: Miguel Ángel Ríos Flores

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