Those Who Stay and the Social Costs of Migration
Caretakers and Children in Eastern Guatemala

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Although in past years the overwhelming majority of migrants heading to the United States were unaccompanied males, leaving their wives and children behind, increasingly females emigrate too. This newer migratory trend is especially true after passage of U.S. immigration policies such as Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 (Donato, et al., 2008). Purportedly, IRCA’s intent was to control undocumented immigration, but instead it encouraged and changed the demographics to incorporate more women crossing the border clandestinely than in previous years (Donato, et al., 2008). In Latin America, and mirroring other sending countries around the world, female migration is virtually equal to that of males (Zlotnik, 2003; Donato, et al, 2006). As Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out (2009:50), “this is the female underside of globalization,” a population movement that has spurred from economically poorer countries to more affluent countries because females in the North “are no longer able or willing to do women’s work of the North.” Importantly, because of the concentration of capital in core areas of the global economy those in peripheral areas increasingly must migrate to survive and to avoid falling even deeper into grinding poverty (Sassen, 1998).

In her compelling story of a Honduran boy’s harrowing journey in search of his migrant mother in the United States, Nazario (2006) observes that divorce and separation are becoming more common in Latin...
America. This situation produces more single mothers who are pressured to leave their children and head to the North. In the case of eastern Guatemala, this has led to an increase in the feminization of migrants to the United States (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). Rather than paying attention to those who leave their home countries—a focus much explored in past migration work—I concentrate on those who stay, particularly caretakers and children. While those who leave and migrate experience multiple changes in their journeys and everyday lives abroad, those who stay contend with many transformations during these family separations. This article examines how migration affects transnational migrant families. Specifically, I touch on intergenerational relations between parents and caregivers, parents and children, and caregivers and children. Such an emphasis considers the social costs of transnational migration and how these unfold at the local level, and, in turn, allows us to better understand what happens at home. By social costs, I refer to the hidden, intangible, and more subjective outcomes of migration that are difficult to examine with conventional yardsticks, yet impinge on the restructuring of transnational migrant households.

The Guatemalan case highlighted here sheds light on the transnational migration experience in other parts of Latin America. The question then becomes: What are the forces that precipitate these transformations and put pressure on families to migrate in the first place? The uneven development of capitalism can be accounted for as one of the leading culprits behind the rise of families affected by transnational migration processes (Schiller, et al., 1992:5). Like many other countries in the western hemisphere, Guatemala had a long history of U.S.-supported authoritarian regimes during the Cold War Era, as well as an unequal distribution of wealth, land, and income. This led to a great deal of political turbulence and economic upheaval. For nearly four decades (1960s–1990s) the country endured a conflict between guerrillas and the state that led to deep-seated wounds and long-festering resentment even within migrant-sending communities (Jonas, 2000; North & Simmons, 1999). Since signing the Peace Accords in 1996, economic conditions have continued to decline and an escalation of social violence has propelled thousands—Guatemalans from all backgrounds and regions—to emigrate.

Consequently, Guatemala’s economy, as in other Latin American countries with significant emigration, has turned from a “breakfast economy” (exporting cash products such as coffee, bananas, and sugar) to a remittance-based economy (exporting cheap labor) (Moran-Taylor, 2009). Although large numbers of Guatemalans emigrate and many reside in urban and rural areas scattered across the United States, there is little research examining this outward movement. The 2000 U.S. census counts 480,665 foreign-born Guatemalans, yet other estimates indicate that, out of a population of nearly 14 million, over one million Guatemalans reside in the United States (U.S. Census, 2000; Migration Policy Institute, 2006). The monies that migrants earn, save, and send back home are an important tangible outcome of international migration. These remittances also play a vital role in the maintenance of transnational migrant families. By the end of 2008, the flow of monetary remittances to Guatemala sent from expatriates amounted to nearly four billion U.S. dollars (Banco de Guatemala, 2008). Clearly, these funds are key for the economies of sending countries, and much scholarly and policy work attends to this topic, but less understood are the ramifications for those who stay and the social costs of this migration.

METHODS

In this article, I draw from a larger study on transnational migration processes. In my larger project I examine and compare return migration and remittances along with their effects on gender, class, and ethnicity in two regionally and ethnically distinct sending communities, Maya & Ladino. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Guatemala from 1999 to 2001 and during short visits between 2003 and 2006. Elsewhere, I provide a more detailed account of my methods and data (see Moran-Taylor, 2008a). While doing fieldwork in eastern Guatemala, a place with a mostly (non-indigenous) Ladino population, locals repeatedly spoke about
family relations, particularly among parents, caretakers, and youth. Throughout my work I sought to delve further into a topic that is significant to those involved and affected by migration and globalization processes. The central issues addressed here, then, derive from research driven by the very concerns of the “studied” population.

NORTHBOUND GUATEMALAN MIGRATORY TRENDS

The first migratory flows of Guatemalans to the United States date back to the 1960s. As political turmoil increased and economic prospects declined, many Guatemalans emigrated to the United States, Canada, and Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. Economic conditions acutely deteriorated during the Neoliberal era and led to much restructuring and change in the composition and class structures in Latin America (Portes & Hoffman, 2003). Migratory flows intensified from this period onward. Other macro-level determinants that strongly accelerated out-migration include the lack of adequate development strategies, steep unemployment rates, high inflation, devaluation of the national currency, a “dollarized” economy, and more recently, an escalation of social violence due to drug trafficking and gang activity (Moran-Taylor, 2008b). Importantly, the economic impact of social violence, in addition to its links to poverty, inequality, and exclusion, result in great development constraints (Moser & McIlwaine, 2005). And as Mexican drug cartels move more aggressively into Guatemala and gangs gone transnational become increasingly involved in the region, urban violence and its pervasive impunity to prosecution plague the country’s stability and economy and further spur out-migration.

In addition to structural factors, dimensions at the local level that are interrelated with economics and poverty impel emigration too. Some driving factors are heavily gendered—women marginalized in their communities or women fleeing their husband’s abuse—and often remain unspoken. Gender-based domestic violence is widespread, yet it mostly remains a private family matter. In fact, given the sensitivity of the topic, I often found cash remittances a less-difficult issue to address than domestic violence. (And in Guatemala—a place where narco [drug] money can easily be conflated with migra money [remittances]—cash remittances can indeedloom as a very sensitive topic). Although husbands abandoning wives is not new in Guatemala, increasingly commonplace is spousal abandonment: males migrating to the United States and forming another family there. For many women facing such estrangements and left with the sole responsibility to nurture and raise the children, out-migration becomes a viable option (Moran-Taylor, 2008a).

MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Several studies show the interactions of transnational migrant families. Many of these studies look at migrant mothers and/or migrant fathers and how they maintain transnational relations and communication across borders. The key role that caretakers play in migration, however, remains overlooked. Typically kin of migrant parents, caretakers are those who stay and care and raise the children left behind when parents migrate. In this article, I frame my discussion within the literature that explores transnational families (i.e., families who are affected by the need for transnational migration). An emphasis on caretakers—their views and experiences—reveals the divergent social practices and relations that arise due to international migration and globalization processes and how these shape peoples’ everyday lives. Moreover, the dynamics of Latin American families and the gendered and intergenerational implications of transnational processes on these have not been so thoroughly addressed (see, however, Soto, 1987; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Thorne, Orellana, Lam & Chee, 2003; Pribilsky, 2004; Dreby, 2006; Sanchéz Molina, 2008; Schmalzbauer, 2008). The Guatemalan case builds on this work by attending to caretakers and children to reveal the kinds of intergenerational relations that develop in migrant families. In doing so, it enhances our understandings of how transnational families are
reconfigured and considers the social costs that impact this household restructuring.

THE SOCIAL COSTS OF MIGRATION

Intergenerational Relations Between Parents and Caregivers
Whereas some migrant mothers and fathers leave for prolonged amounts of time with the idea of returning, others have or express no such intentions, while others emigrate and abandon their children. For the most part, U.S.-bound Guatemalan parents who migrate for a long period stay connected in multiple ways with loved ones at home. While the living arrangements that migrant parents set up for their children come with certain financial obligations, these do not always pan out for those who stay. Some parents do not sustain close ties and neglect their financial obligations. A case in point is Miriam, a mother of two young children. (To maintain confidentiality, throughout, I use pseudonyms instead of actual names.) She emigrated to Los Angeles and placed her children in two different households—a strategy to make her migration more successful since she lacked the economic resources to support two children under one living arrangement. While abroad, however, she failed to remit any money. Miriam also failed to maintain any physical or emotional connection with her children during her long absence. In this case, the caretakers resented the mother’s migration and even felt exploited. A different story unfolds for those who stay in touch emotionally and financially. For instance, if migrant mothers fail to return after a long period, caretakers do not believe that she has forsaken her family; they recognize that the return may not be possible due to economic constraints. Given Guatemala’s steep unemployment, those at home realize that migrant parents may need to stay abroad longer than initially intended (Moran-Taylor, 2008a).

Intergenerational Relations Between Parents and Children
When migrant parents stay physically separated from their kin for long periods of time, their children are more disposed to develop other feelings. Luz, for example, lives and works in Los Angeles and has left five youngsters behind with her elderly mother. Whenever she remits money to them, their most urgent concern is not how their mother is faring. Rather, they become more preoccupied by how much money she sends. This is a sensitive topic and one that seems to dominate telephone communications. The topic of remittances becomes even more salient if the mother is unable to remit part of her earnings. Plainly, for children who have migrant parents abroad who send remittances, money is replacing intimacy (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). This situation parallels the Filipino case that Parreñas (2005) observes: when mothers migrate, sending remittances becomes a common, even if commodified, tactic for engendering intimacy.

Migration-related changes may result in positive and negative sociocultural outcomes for children in Guatemala when parents emigrate. My data reveals that migration adversely affects young males at home when they become involved in gangs, juvenile delinquency, drugs, and alcohol. Undoubtedly, growing unemployment rates and lack of economic resources affect young people, but these factors alone cannot entirely explain the gamut of transformations. The role of U.S.-bound migration is linked to these changes too. When parents are abroad, children with caretakers experience less pressure to behave well. These outcomes mirror what parents fear their children will be drawn to if raised abroad (see also Thorne, et al., 2001).

The social costs of migration are more deleterious, however, among girls. Since caretakers do not always have a vigilant eye, many adolescent girls become promiscuous, resulting in a growing trend of unwed mothers. Recently, for example, Guatemala’s mainstream newspaper reported a 2.5 percent growth in adolescent pregnancies, especially among girls from poor areas with little schooling and even among girls as young as ten (Prensa Libre, 2009). Not only do these outcomes lead to deeper poverty, but they also constrain the socioeconomic development of the country. Moreover, for many girls, becoming romantically involved with (non-familial) returnees is often
viewed as a way out of their home community and a path to going abroad (Moran-Taylor, 2008a).

The social costs of U.S.-bound migration are also present in the realm of schooling. In terms of the adverse effects, my interviews revealed that school performance radically declined, particularly after parents first leave. A retired principal mentioned, for example, that there were many disciplinary problems in schools and youngsters simply do not want to study as much when parents remain abroad. Similarly, Kandel and Massey (2002) found this pattern in Mexico where a culture of migration has formed and discouraged good educational performance. Conversely, migration may positively affect schooling. In her work among Honduran transnational families, Schmalzbauer (2008) observes that education is one of the most celebrated areas in which families invest their monies earned from backbreaking jobs in the North. The support is received with utmost gratitude from the children and helps maintain parent-child relations.

In the Guatemalan case, migration can afford those who remit monies the opportunity to enroll their offspring in private rather than public schools. This grants children a better education and offers family members a tacit display of their greater social status within the community. Remittances also afford girls greater access to formal education, which is crucial because they receive few opportunities for basic education. In turn, this outcome gradually brings about changes in women’s traditional gender roles and status. And for children in nearby villages these funds allow for a continuation from primary to secondary school (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). For some, this extended schooling allows them to learn a skill at a vocational school and to secure better pay as an accountant, teacher, or secretary. For others with greater aspirations and a high school diploma, it may even make it possible to attend university. Clearly, this is human capital that provides young people with greater social mobility and allows them to climb out of the harsh economic reality that defines their lives in the rigid structures enveloping Guatemalan society.

**Intergenerational Relations Between Caretakers and Children**

When Guatemalan mothers and fathers venture to the North, typically the children stay with the maternal grandmother. Such a scenario is depicted in the beginning scenes of *La Misma Luna (Under the Same Moon)* (Riggen, et al., 2007), an extraordinary film that shows how Carlitos, a nine-year old Mexican boy, lives with his maternal grandmother because his mother migrated to Los Angeles, California. After his caring abue (grandmother) suddenly dies, Carlitos feels compelled to leave and search for his mother who has been away for nearly four years. And in Nazario’s (2006) brilliant book, *Enrique’s Journey*, Enrique, a young Honduran boy, is left under the care of his maternal grandmother. Recent research among Mexican transnational families nicely illustrates this pattern too when addressing the differences in emotional responses to separation between mothers and fathers while apart from children left with caretakers (e.g., Dreby, 2006).

For Guatemalan caretakers who care for children from their childhood to their teen years, regulating and coordinating their behavior becomes even more of an onerous task as they grow older. In particular, the behavior of boys becomes problematic as they grow older and view joining a local gang or spending their parents’ money on alcohol and expensive consumer goods as an outlet for their rebellion (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). The differing disciplinary tactics employed by parents and caretakers may also aggravate social relations. Whereas caretakers may implement more severe tactics, returnee parents tend to be more lax. This looser attitude develops among migrant parents because of U.S. rhetoric advocating children’s rights and the divergent disciplinary perspectives embraced abroad. The greater awareness of child abuse and the increased scope of state intervention permitted by U.S. also contribute to changing the attitudes of migrant parents. To illustrate, Armando and his aging mother were left in charge of his sister’s offspring. After six years away from home, the migrant mother returned. Tensions arose between the returnee and her relatives due to divergent parenting styles and practices that each embraced: the
mother was less willing to reprimand her children for misbehaving. Social relations in transnational migrant households take a toll when, after several years abroad, parents send for their offspring (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). Certainly, the emotional wear and tear that caretakers often experience may strain social relations and even fragment families.

**CONCLUSION**

The social obstacles and current U.S. immigration policies that many migrants from developing countries encounter along with the consequences of globalization have led to an increase in transnational families (Parreñas, 2005). Importantly, caretakers sustain transnational families enabling migrant parents to go, stay, and work abroad for lengthy periods because they are taking care of the parents’ offspring. Equally significant, caregivers buttress the social reproduction processes when parents emigrate and caregivers occasionally even shoulder the financial burden. In other words, caretakers help reproduce the next generation of migrant workers—a generation that already lives in a culture of migration (Moran-Taylor, 2008a). While migration helps those who stay behind survive, it also functions as a strategy to move up the rigid hierarchical structures in Guatemalan society, particularly among migrant families who use their hard-won earnings to better their children’s education. However, with the flagging economy in the United States, migrants’ financial obligations at home have dwindled considerably. In turn, cash remittances to Guatemala (like Mexico) have considerably diminished—a dire situation for caretakers with scarce economic resources and one that will affect many children left behind. By paying attention to the social aspects rather than economic consequences of migration, my research provides a glimpse of outcomes that are less visible and more subjective, yet significant for those who stay—caretakers and children.

**REFERENCES**


