

“I Feel Like a Different Woman”

Negotiating Gender and Motherhood in the Context of Transnational Migration from Axochiapan, Morelos, to Minneapolis, Minnesota

To explore if, in effect, in the context of transnational migration ‘traditional’ notions of gender and motherhood are re-defined, this article compares the before and after migration lived experiences of a group of Mexican mothers who migrated from Axochiapan, Morelos to Minneapolis, Minnesota. The main thesis, on which this paper is based, consists of arguing for the adoption of a view capable of providing us with the necessary insights to further explore the transnational emotional ties evoked in the redefinition of ‘traditional’ notions of gender and motherhood. According to the collected narratives and in line with the conclusions reached by other studies in the subject, the main challenge faced by migrant mothers who crossed the border without their children, is the difficulty to overcome the resentment and strain caused by physical separation. However, and without minimizing the importance of this aspect, we also found that migration presented an opportunity to turn around some of the early gendered norms, values and practices learnt in Axochiapan that, before crossing the border, had a negative impact on the self-perception of the participants as women and mothers.

Mexican migration to the United States is historical in nature and although women have always been part of it, the systematic study of their border crossings emerged at the end of the '70s with the introduction of the gender perspective in migration research. Authors like Marina Ariza, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (“La incorporación”) and Ivonne Szasz agree on the fact that for a long time, one of the main features of migration studies was the exclusion of women. According to Carmen Gregorio Gil this exclusion was the result of two important bias. The first, methodological and characterized for collecting data about women from migrant men and the second, ideological

and a direct consequence of the androcentric view which tended to stereotype migrant women only as companions of migrant men.

After more than three decades of existence, the main contributions of the gender perspective have been to highlight that women (just like men) also migrate in an independent and autonomous manner and that gender is indeed a constitutive element of migration. Nowadays and at the height of its consolidation, the gender perspective has started to favour heterogeneous and more subjective views rather than homogeneous and 'objective' explanations of the effects of migration on women's lives (Ariza). A variety of studies has started to deepen in the complexities and diversity of practices and identities affected by the experience of migration (Mahler and Pessar; Pessar; Menjivar; Segura and Zavella). In this sense, the study of motherhood as well as migrant women's mothering, have turned out to be one of the most fruitful research avenues in the field.

To explore if, in effect, in the context of transnational migration 'traditional' notions of gender and motherhood are re-defined, this article compares the before and after migration lived experiences of a group of Mexican mothers who migrated from Axochiapan, Morelos to Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹ The main thesis on which this paper is based, consists of arguing for the adoption of a view capable of providing us with the necessary insights to further explore the transnational emotional ties evoked in the redefinition of 'traditional' notions of gender and motherhood. In our view, this can only be achieved by paying special attention to the early gender experiences lived in the home country that constitute significant indicators of those first meanings associated with being a woman and a mother.

The first part of this article presents a brief literature review of the study of gender and motherhood in the context of transnational migration. In a second part, we introduce relevant aspects of the research context and the methods used to carry out the research from which this paper derives. In the findings section, we focus on presenting and exemplifying what, according to the analysed narratives, were three crucial aspects in the gender and motherhood re-definition process experienced by the interviewees. These aspects concentrate on the early meanings associated with being a woman and a mother learnt in Axochiapan, the particularities of crossing the border while being a single mother and the challenges and opportunities brought by transnational motherhood. Finally, we conclude by pointing out future research avenues on the subject.

Gender and Motherhood in the Context of Transnational Migration

As mentioned before, one of the main contributions of the gender perspective has been to prove that gender is a structuring element of migration. Various

studies focused on analysing the effects of migration on families have revealed the different ways in which social constructions of “the masculine” and “the feminine” affect women’s possibilities of crossing the border. Research carried out in Mexico points out that more often than not, women’s autonomous and independent migrations tend to be actively discouraged. This discouragement is partly based on the simplistic view that migration to the United States is a masculine domain, consequence of economic need and therefore socially “appropriate” to men fulfilling their “traditional” role as breadwinners.

Reality does not always follow prescriptive gender roles and discourses, not all families fit the idealized image of the nuclear family where a man is the sole economic provider. But what is interesting to highlight, is that female independent migrations are more frequent in single-parent families headed by a female where authority patterns tend to be more flexible (Chant; Salazar, M.). In addition, Sylvia Chant as well as Cristina Oehmichen, have exposed the existent association between independent female migrations and specific factors such as being a single mother or being single at the moment of crossing the border. Therefore, migrant women’s family backgrounds as well as the experience of motherhood *per se* do play a vital role in encouraging female independent migrations.

Important to note is the fact that although the rise of single-parent families in Mexico is slowly making of international migration a socially acceptable way for single mothers to provide for their children, this does not mean it has stopped being perceived as a less than optimal scenario. In fact, as Anne Phoenix has stated, migrant mothers tend to “mother on the margins” because their mothering occurs in circumstances constructed as non-normative.

Some studies on the subject reveal the differential expectations migrant mothers face in comparison to migrant fathers (Dreby “Managing”; Salazar Parreñas (*Servants of Globalization; Children of Global Migration*); Phoenix). For instance, Joanna Dreby identifies in what she calls “transnational gossip” a mechanism to reinforce ‘traditional’ gender expectations that in the context of transnational migration subject migrant mothers to a risky state of social vulnerability and easily triggered public censure. Another aspect to take into account is the burden these women carry caused by the disruptions and dislocations migration brings to families separated by a physical border (Schmalzbauer).

Since 1997, when Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestina Avila coined the term “transnational motherhood” to describe immigrant women’s mothering from a physical distance and across transnational boundaries, there has been an evident increase in the attention given to this global phenomenon. Although strictly speaking the term refers to immigrant mothers who have left their children in their home country, we consider important to broaden it to include mothers who are not necessarily separated from their children but still

experience specific conflicts derived from what Diane Wolf calls “emotional transnationalism.” In our view this should not only refer to the emotional transnational ties evoked despite migration, but also to the role they play in shaping the ways immigrant women position themselves as mothers and reconceptualise their identities.

Research Context and Methods

Despite the long history of migration from Mexico to the United States, massive migration from Axochiapan, Morelos to Minneapolis, Minnesota is relatively recent and only started intensifying during the '90s. In the case of Axochiapan, it is worth noting its ranking as the third most marginalized municipality in the state of Morelos. This fact is reflected in an elevated percentage of illiterate people, in numerous families living in overcrowded spaces and with a very low household income, and in the existence of small communities with populations of less than a hundred without access to basic services like water and drainage.

In comparison to other parts of Mexico where “to go north” has been socially normalized almost equally for men and women, in Axochiapan, migration is still very much considered a masculine domain. The local social imaginary is infested with stories of migrant women socially perceived as ‘bad mothers’, who once “up north” fell into prostitution and abandoned their kids. In the case of men, migration acquires other meanings not at all associated to deviation from the norm but to a socially approved way of ‘being a man’, fulfilling ‘traditional’ social expectations and ‘being a good father’.

All data presented in this article was collected through semi-structured, episodic, in-depth interviews with twelve Mexican women born in Axochiapan and who currently reside in the city of Minneapolis. Most participants were found through previous contacts made in Axochiapan and through community groups in which some Mexican women actively helped the researcher find participants in the study. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish in the houses of the interviewees in one or more sessions. Once recorded, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysis was carried out through different codifications that allowed the author to work inductively, moving from the specifics to the generalities and from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith, Flowers and Larkin).

The average age of the participants is 39 years old and most of them only finished elementary school. However, there are a few cases in which participants graduated from high school or even did some kind of vocational training. All of them have more than one child and at present, half of them are full time homemakers. All have experience working outside their homes; the kinds of

jobs in which most of them have been employed, either in Axochiapan or in the United States, have been mainly informal and poorly paid.

Early Gender Socialization: Experiences in Axochiapan

In order to compare the before and after lived experiences of gender and motherhood, it is relevant to turn to the gendered norms, values and practices observed by participants through the roles performed in Axochiapan by their own mothers. In this respect, three aspects stand out: the sexual division of work, the power and authority structure in the family and the existence of violence and other gendered disempowering mechanisms at home.

The sexual division of work in the family is one of the paradigmatic expressions of a gender logic that clearly establishes and values in an unequal manner what are considered “appropriate” “masculine” and “feminine” roles. Most participants who grew up in nuclear families recall the existence of a strict labour separation in which the father used to fulfil the “traditional” role of economic provider while the mother was exclusively assigned to perform housework and childcare.

Although the precarious economic situation remembered by most of them, would not always allowed the literal fulfillment of this arrangement, what is important to highlight is that despite the mother’s regular economic contributions to the family, their work outside the home is perceived as less important, irregular and only complementary to that of the father.

In the few and rare cases in which the mother’s extra-domestic work is openly acknowledged, the collected narratives portray this circumstance as a constant source of conflict not only for the family but also to people outside of it who considered it a transgression of the custom. For example, María mentions that after a work accident suffered by her father, her mother became the sole economic provider for the family. However, this arrangement quickly unleashed some public censure closely associated with the perception of a deviant and therefore, non-normative power distribution within the family: “My mum has told me: ‘You know what? People say your father *anda bajo mis naguas* (is under my thumb) ... but no, we don’t see it that way’.”

In another case, Laura remembers how when her mother decided to start her own business, this initiative turned into a constant source of conflict and a threat to the public perception of her father’s ability to provide for the family:

When my mum had the business, they did have lots of problems. My dad would say that she was crazy, “Why a business?” It is not like we are struggling economically.” ... So, yes. I do remember those times because they were arguing all the time and one day my brother and I told my mum:

"We are not little anymore, don't worry about us. If you want to split up just do it." But my mum also thinks that once you marry that's for life ... so she ended up staying with him.

In contrast to issues relating to extra-domestic work, where as seen above, prescriptive roles were not always followed, housework and childcare were, in discourse as well as in practice, women's exclusive domain. For instance, Bety remembers the arrangements in her family in the following way:

From time to time someone would go and help us cook or iron or things like that ... but with my clothes, I would do the laundry, I would wash my clothes. And together with my sisters we would tidy up and clean the bedrooms, my brothers' rooms as well. We would also clean for them.

Q: And what did you think of having to clean your brothers' rooms?
I got used to that, it was always like that.

Regarding the kinds of issues participants remembered in relation to the power and authority structure within the family, stand-out aspects referred to decision making as well as differentiated expectations and standards for sons and daughters. In this sense, interviewees invariably assigned the role of decision makers to their fathers and not their mothers. Another aspect that clearly appears in most narratives, points to sex hierarchies created within the families and expressed in the freedom and permissions given to sons but denied to daughters. When questioned about the existence of gender discrimination in her family, Rosario explained:

Well, sometimes when you are young you feel it because you want to go to parties on your own, and no ... in those times they wouldn't let you go on your own.

Q: And was it different with your brothers?

Yes. I wouldn't feel it, but yes. We would think: "Why just for being men can they go and not me?" But that's the way culture is, and we would say: "That's fine..." It's fine because maybe it's true that women are more at risk.

In addition to the gendered norms and values described above, most participants remember growing up while witnessing frequent episodes of domestic violence perpetrated against their mothers.

Q: And when you were little, do you remember how was the relationship between your parents?

Yes, I remember it was violent. My dad used to drink a lot, he had his land

and he would earn good money but he would go and spend it on alcohol or betting at the cockfights or the horseraces. Then he would come back drunk and beat up my mum all the time.

In another case, Marta remembers not only the physical abuse suffered by her mother, but also the psychological one that did not allow her to visualise any way out of it.

Well, my mum she didn't have any support from her family. She was always saying she wanted to leave him, but she grew up with her grandparents, she was an orphan and my grandfather used to tell her that if she left my dad she wasn't welcome with them anymore. And I think that was very difficult for her and my dad would take advantage of that and he would tell her that she wasn't capable of leaving him, that without him she would only end up working the streets.

In synthesis, what we observe in the collected narratives is, that the early meanings associated with being a woman and a mother undervalue the practices and roles considered as ‘traditionally’ feminine. Therefore, it is not surprising that through the interviewees’ description of their families’ backgrounds, their mothers appear to occupy a secondary place that, at least in their discourse, is completely subordinated to the masculine. A second aspect that is important to highlight refers to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu) present in the memories of the participants. Its effects are reflected on the internalisation of disempowering discourses that facilitated the acceptance of gender prescriptive roles and inequalities.

Being a Single Mother and Crossing the Border

In Axochiapan, one of the main avenues for a woman to obtain social approval and respect is by establishing a formal relationship with a man. This is not surprising if we consider the disdain associated to ‘the feminine’ expressed in the memories of the participants’ experiences at home. Furthermore, this convention appears as one of the central reasons for some interviewees and their mothers to put up with constant episodes of violence and abuse at the hands of their partners. In this sense, fear of the disapproval brought by breaking with what is socially valued (being in a formal relationship with a man), had serious repercussions for the perceptions some participants had of themselves as women and mothers.

In the case of those participants who were single mothers, either because they became pregnant without being in a relationship or because they had actually

separated from their partners, the cost brought by this situation implied being socially perceived as *fracasadas* (failed) and *fáciles* (sluts). It is relevant to note that participants who were single mothers before migrating to Minneapolis, clearly remember the difficulties experienced trying to obtain men's respect in Axochiapan.

And just for being a woman or having sex with someone and because you already have a child, they don't feel they have to respect you ... they think that: "Well, she already has a child." So, they can have sex with you and no big deal, anyways if you have one more child it doesn't matter, right? And yeah! I think that being a woman, that's what they criticize the most over there.

In this vein, it is important to highlight the existence in Axochiapan of a peculiar hierarchy regarding the social value of a woman and that is for the most part, the result of her sexuality being either socially dignified or condemned. Dignified if the woman in question is married and has children or condemned if she is a single mother. This is a key aspect because it was the existence of this public censure and the need to escape from it, one of the main reasons behind most participants' decision to "go north."

The Challenges and Opportunities of Transnational Motherhood

Even though the term transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila) refers to factual mothering across borders; not all participants in this study experienced the physical separation from their children that in a strict sense is implied in this term. However, we decided to incorporate their experiences as well, given the evocation of transnational ties to signify their mothering and that are closely associated to experiences lived across the border. In the following paragraphs we focus on the challenges and opportunities brought by migration that conflicted but also allowed the interviewees to (re)position themselves in their own terms as women and mothers.

In line with other studies (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila; Salazar-Parreñas [*Servants; Children*]; Crawford; Phoenix) and according to the collected testimonies, the main challenge brought by migration refers to the emotional and physical distance between mother and children in cases where participants migrated leaving their kids in Mexico. Although crossing the border represented for these women one of the few possibilities to economically provide for them, most interviewees recognize the difficulty of overcoming the resentment and strain caused by mothering from afar. For example, Carolina, who currently lives in Minneapolis and has reunited with her children, explains the effects of her first two migrations on her children.

It is hard. The first time I came, I think my girl was three years old, something like that. And when I went back she didn't know me anymore. And then, when I came back again, it was not for a long time, but they still think it was an eternity and I cannot change their opinion. It was a short period of time, but they think I left them for a long time.

In another case, Marta, who has two kids in Mexico and two in Minneapolis, elaborates on the effects of this situation.

I feel that my kids, the ones that are in Mexico, are resentful towards me because I left them. At least that is what I notice when I talk to them, because they tell me, especially the youngest says: “Mummy, come back.” And I say: “Oh! But your brother is at preschool here, once he finishes I'll go back.” And he says: “Well, leave him there, in the same way you left me here. Put them in bed and come back, so when they wake up you are not there anymore.” They are resentful and maybe that resentment will go away or maybe it won't, but it hurts me a lot.

Although Carolina and Marta migrated after separating from the fathers of their kids and recall experiencing significant economic hardship at the time, their narratives remind us of the complexities involved in trying to preserve emotional ties from afar. As Anne Phoenix has mentioned in relation to this type of transnational motherhood, this: “...raises questions about how best to reconcile material and emotional care for children in a context where a focus on attachment makes separation from young children potentially contentious and blameworthy.”

Despite the high emotional price paid by participants like Carolina and Marta, it is necessary to note that migration also opened up relevant opportunities. These are expressed in the possibility to (re)define and turn around some of the early meaning associated with being a woman and a mother and that, as we have seen, were affecting the self-perception of some participants.

For example, Laura, who as a single mother in Axochiapan was facing public censure and disrespect from men, explains how in Minneapolis she was able to start a new relationship and incorporate a paternal figure into the lives of her children. When talking about her partner for the last seven years, she explains:

He has been there with me and he has helped me. He has never said, “That's your problem.” No, he has always been there for me. And with my children he has been there for them, especially with my little boy, maybe because he's a man and it is easier to relate to him. With my eldest girl

as well, but not as much because she's very attached to my parents and he doesn't want to interfere with that. But with my little boy, he loves him. Sometimes just joking I tell him that I am going to break up with Memo, and my little boy says that if that ever happens he would go with him and not with me.

In this sense, crossing the border allowed some participants to escape from what in Axochiapan had become problematic situations that, as we have seen, had subjected some of them to social disapproval and discredit. In other cases, migration facilitated fostering loving mother-child relationships that, at least in the experience of some participants, would have been difficult to achieve in precarious conditions characterized by violence and abuse. For example, when talking about her experiences as a mother, Elvira says the basis of her mothering style has been to avoid for her children what she felt were important shortcomings in the relationship with her parents in Mexico.

Well, I think the way my parents made me feel or the way they educated me wasn't alright, no, it was not alright. So, with my kids they love me, you see? They say: "Mum, I love you," "Mum, have a good night." Always with a kiss and that's how the relationship with them works. I feel that is how I would have liked it with my parents in Mexico, but no, it wasn't like that.

Last, it is important to note that for participants who in Axochiapan had been encouraged to remain in abusive relationships with the fathers of their children, migration presented an opportunity to feel empowered and challenge the gender discourses learnt in Mexico. One of these cases is found in Carolina's testimony who explains some of the changes experienced as a consequence of her migration.

My personality, I do feel like a different woman because here is where I learnt to value myself as a woman. For instance, with my kids ... and here I can work and be independent. That's what I like the most. Here life is different for everyone because you become more independent.

As we have seen and although the experiences of gender and motherhood in the context of transnational migration are not clear cut and therefore are full of contradictions, it is important to remember Avtar Brah's words in relation to diasporas: "The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hopes and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political

terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (193).

Conclusions

In order to explore if, in effect, in the context of transnational migration, “traditional” notions of gender and motherhood are redefined, this article compared the before and after migration experiences of a group of women who migrated from Axochiapan, Morelos, to Minneapolis, Minnesota.

According to the collected narratives and in line with the conclusions reached by other studies in the subject, the main challenge faced by migrant mothers who migrated leaving their children in Mexico, is the difficulty to overcome the resentment and strain caused by physical separation. However, and without minimizing the importance of this aspect, we have seen as well that migration presented an opportunity to turn around some of the early gendered norms, values and practices learnt in Axochiapan that had a negative impact on the self-perception of the participants as women and mothers.

Although the subject deserves a much more detailed analysis, we believe the presented findings constitute important cues to continue advancing on the exploration of the complex relationship between migration, gender and motherhood. In our perspective, three main aspects stand-out. The first, refers to the importance of research that continues incorporating a transnational optic capable of allowing us to delve into the change and/or reproduction of gendered cultural repertoires as a consequence of migration experience. The second, refers to the need for more studies centered on comparing intergenerational motherhood experiences in the context of transnational migration. And last, we would like to call for more cross-cultural research to further our understanding not only of the particularities but also the commonalities experienced by migrant mothers around the world.

¹This study is part of the research carried out to complete my Doctoral dissertation at the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty (FLACSO) in Mexico City. The dissertation title is: “Transnational Gendered Subjectivities in the migratory flow from Axochiapan, Morelos to Minneapolis, Minnesota.” Fieldwork was carried out in 2010 and long periods of time were spent in each of these places in order to access and establish relationships with the participants. Data was collected through in-depth, episodic, semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analysed in an inductive manner, allowing the author to move from the specifics to the generalities and from the descriptive to the interpretative. Translations from Spanish are my own and

names of those interviewed have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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