Being a transnational mother while staying at home. Migrants’ wives in Mexico City

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How does long-distance migration, which separates and reorganizes families, transform the experience of being a mother? While this question has been studied extensively for migrant mothers taking on their role from abroad (transnational motherhood), there is little research into the situation of those who remain responsible for children in the absence of fathers. It is true that this configuration seems, at first sight, less problematic for the way that productive and reproductive tasks are distributed, in terms of gender, in many Western families. At the micro level, however, this absence has an impact on the family organization and the distribution of parental roles. This article seeks to focus our regard on migrants’ households in the country of origin. It suggests that women who remain alone in the absence of their partner transform their practices as mother in ways that are worth further analysis. How does the daily life of these women change and how do they perceive these changes? What social, familial, spatial resources can they mobilize in facing their new situation? It is pertinent to ask these questions in Mexico, where migration is particularly high, very diverse and often long-term.

Previous research on these questions has concentrated on rural areas (Malkin, 2004; Marroni, D’Aubeterre Buznego, 2002; Barrera Bassols, Oehmichen Bazán, 2000). The results are ambivalent. On the one hand, they show that women often see themselves being attributed new tasks that expose them to areas of socialization: for example, they become involved in local political activities, replacing the absent men, or they assume their share of productive work. In this sense, migration opens up opportunities for
questioning gender models, amongst other factors (Anthias, 2012). Yet migrants’ wives remain responsible for the raising of children, sometimes with help from female relatives; their activities are supervised by other women, and in particular their mother-in-law, who ensures their conformity with behavioural norms expected of a good wife and mother: these mechanisms encourage the reproduction of prior gender schemas in migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Cranford, 2006; Herrera, 2013).

3 The maternal role must thus be seen as one of many components in the women’s multiple roles: professional activities, marital relationship, role as daughter, in particular. I propose to review maternity³ from three perspectives: first, as a socially and historically constructed norm that defines the mother’s expected roles; second, as practices dictated by this norm and later variations, reappropriations, and readaptations (Herrera, Carrillo, 2009); and, finally, as a form of definition for individuals in relation to themselves and to others as part of a comprehensive approach. The norms defining parental roles are characterized by their diversity, even within the same community: their conception is influenced by ethnic origin, social class, generation, and temporal and spatial factors (Baldassar, Merla, 2013). These should be viewed as relational forms forged in partnership with the parent of the opposite sex, on the one hand, with whom the division of tasks is often seen in terms of complementarity and opposition, and with previous generations, on the other. It is this area of tension, between reproduction and contestation of maternity norms and practices, and its repercussions for women, that I want to explore while focusing on a context that has been little studied: international migration from urban areas.

4 Until the 1990s, there was greater and more visible international migration in the Mexican countryside. Meanwhile, major cities and medium-sized towns were not only absorbing internal migrants from different regions in the country but have become departure zones for the United States. According to the EMIF Norte survey, the number of city-dwellers³ migrating between 2000 and 2010 increased from 50% to 63% (CONAPO, 2014). We can hypothesize that cities generate constraints and opportunities that are quite different from those observed in rural areas. First, the extended family members are dispersed over a larger area and exposed to a wider variety of lifestyles. In addition, they can attenuate systems for social control and reproduction of gendered models that are often found in rural communities. Given the rapid growth of megacities, such as Mexico City, which has been fuelled by the arrival of rural migrants throughout the 20th century, we can analyse the imbrication of internal and international migration in order to see how the city acts as an interconnection point.

5 The study of urban migration raises several methodological challenges: in particular, the diversity of citizens’ sociological profiles in terms of social class, ethnicity, and length of residence in the city. Previous research into international migration from Mexican cities has mostly focused on the demographic and economic issues, rather than taking a more qualitative approach (Papail, 2003; Hernández-León, 2008; Arias, Woo, 2007). This case study will therefore shed light on the experience of actors and place them within a specific context (Baldassar, Merla, 2013). It will focus on one specific type of city emigration: persons who were born in rural areas and migrated internally to Mexico City, a schema that is very common in Mexico and, in particular, for the indigenous population in the second half of the 20th century (Arizpe, 1975). In this study, all the interviewees came with their families from the same village and their husbands left for the United States in the early 2000s. They describe themselves, and are identified by other city-
dwellers and institutions, as ‘indigenous’
. More specifically, they are ‘otomí’, a socially constructed category that refers to historical processes of racialization and ethnicization. Despite the specificity of their origins, their migratory background is typical of changes in Mexican emigration to the United States that have been observed over the last 30 years and of the emergence of new profiles of international migrants which include members of the urban working class and the indigenous population (Durand, 2007).

Between 2003 and 2009, as part of my PhD research, I carried out an ethnographic survey in Mexico City in which I interviewed some 80 families living in the same district during a 12-month stay followed up by several shorter visits. I followed up this survey with observations of activities in a local association that works regularly with internal migrants and visits to the interviewees in their home village and the United States. Formal and informal interviews were carried out with seven women in their thirties whose husbands had migrated to the United States and maintained links with their family. Interviews were carried out and repeated over time for five of these women, together with observations of their daily activities, an essential arrangement for understanding how they coped with migration and absence over time: organization of daily and family life, marital relations, and relationship with self, all of which evolve over time. Using this ethnographical approach made it possible for me to understand how different spheres become imbricated: intimacy within the nuclear family and the couple, relationships with the extended family, and participation in other areas of socialization.

After a short presentation of the migration process and the local context for this survey, this article will analyse how the women’s daily lives have been transformed as a result of their husbands’ departure for the United States. The way they approach maternity, for which I have used the term ‘on-the-spot maternity’ as opposed to ‘distance maternity’, has often been described in studies of transnational families. However, this comes into conflict with the norms followed by previous generations. Finally, I will show how women take advantage of resources available in the city to reconfigure family networks and develop areas of autonomy.

Migration towards and from the city

In the village in the State of Queretaro that is the home for the migrant women in my case study, the push factors for men and women moving into Mexico cities since the 1940s were poverty and the agricultural crisis and migration took place in several phases: seasonal and short-term migration, and for some families, long-term installation in the city from the 1990s. In Mexico City, the men worked in the construction industry, often as day labourers, and the women sold crafts, sweets and cigarettes in the informal market. Several families from this village lived together in slum dwellings on wastelands or abandoned buildings in the city centre, a form of social and territorial organization referred to here as the ‘group’. Interactions with other citizens are often racist, despite the city’s promotion of multicultural policies and the fact that indigenous people have greater access to certain benefits, including housing allowances or interpreters (Oehmichen Bazán, 2005; Molina, González, Yanez, 2005; Gros, Dumoulin Kervran, 2011).

In their daily life in Mexico City, Otomi women have to cope with conflictual situations, stigmatization and valorization, cultural difference and integration. The black market crystallizes these tensions. There are advantages in being identified as indigenous when selling handicrafts, but certain negative representations are simultaneously reinforced.
The hawkers are often accompanied by their small children. Selling in the street has been assimilated with begging and child labour and thus exposed the women to being stigmatized as a bad mother and interpreted as a lack of integration by indigenous women. These critical comments come from passers-by, the media, institutions and the associations that gravitate around indigenous groups. One neighbourhood association in particular, the Colibri Centre, has worked with the Otomi families since the late 1990s. It offers a range of activities most of which are educational (workshops on alcoholism, domestic violence, drugs) or charitable (meals for children), but their main role lies in explicitly condemning the model of maternity incarnated by women hawkers. The arrival of Otomis in the capital has led to their living at the margin, both geographically and economically, and this reflects the extreme inequality, poverty and racism that the indigenous experience in Mexico City.

The desire for a better life is put forward as the principal motivation by those who leave Mexico City for the United States. Indigenous groups in Mexico City began to migrate there some 15 years ago. Still relatively rare, most of these migrants are men crossing the frontier with coyotes and finding work in industry and the restaurant sector. Because of the economic and human cost involved, this type of clandestine migration leads to long-term absences from Mexico, rather than regular short-term visits. For this reason, it is a source of disapproval within the group and within the couple, as most women are strongly opposed to their husband’s departure.

We must remember that migration is a key element in the history of the Otomi groups and its members, reflecting gendered roles in both internal and international migration in Latin America: over-representation of women in internal migration and of men in international migration (Lara Flores, 2012). In the past, parents of the women interviewed for this study had temporarily migrated to Mexico City: a move they later imitated. The departure of their fathers for the United States the mothers found themselves having to take on a new role, that of a wife alone with her children.

Withdrawal into the domestic sphere and management of absence

After the departure of their spouse, these women had to reorganize their daily life: on the one hand, they had to assume a redistribution of parental roles and, on the other, take on different social roles.

Initially, the men and women had to readapt their home life in order to compensate for the absence of the fathers in terms of household management and the children’s education. To maintain their role as ‘distant father’, the men would regularly telephone the family and send money and presents. Those that I met in the United States talked frankly about their difficulties with living far from their children and their loneliness did not in any way reduce their paternal role to simply that of breadwinner. Furthermore, according to their wives, they appeared to be very reticent to exert their authority over their children, as this could lead to conflict. For example, Adelia’s husband sent presents for the children, even when she told him that they should be punished. “I have to be a mother and a father”, said Adelia, expressing both her accumulation of tasks and recognition of sexual roles (Adelia, 3 children, alone for 3 years, 2006). Similar results were found in other studies: even if, in practice, the women have to exert the authority...
that is usually allocated to men, they refer to the usual distribution of sexual roles (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). Thus, the line between masculine and feminine roles has barely changed.

14 Nevertheless, the way these women organize their daily life has changed considerably. Already documented in other migration situations, the morality and sexuality of migrants’ spouses in Mexico City are heavily monitored by neighbours from the same village (Malkin, 2004; Marroni, D’Aubeterre Buznego, 2002; Barrera Bassols, Oehmichen Bazán, 2000). Subjected to intimidation, insults and graffiti on their doors, these women avoid leaving the house, or go out only when accompanied by their children whose presence guarantees their good conduct. Rumours not only isolate the women from the rest of the group, but also lead to their giving up their activities as hawkers because selling in the streets exposed them to gossip. As a result, the household is dependent on the modest sums sent by their husbands from the United States, which are unreliable because of the precariousness of their job contracts. It leads to the women becoming economically dependent on their husband and accentuates their anxiety about being abandoned.

15 In the interviews, most of the women said that they too wanted to migrate to the United States, but this possibility is rapidly brushed aside, as the risks and costs involved in crossing the frontier make it impossible to take their children with them. Furthermore, with a family history of migration that has left close relatives scattered between the city and the village, they have difficulty deciding, when the time comes, with whom to leave the children. As the grandparents usually live in the village, they often think that forcing the children to leave the city and go back to the village is too harsh an upheaval for them. Next, there is the question of paying for the journey: the women must convince their husband to pay for a coyote, but the men generally refuse because, in their eyes, the mother’s place is with her children. Juliana says tearfully, “I want to leave, I want to leave, I’m suffocating here, but he won’t let me go” (Juliana, 4 children, alone for 6 months, Mexico City, 2007).

16 Restricted to the domestic sphere, the women withdraw from public areas and activities that they could previously enjoy. During the first months after the departure of their husband, they are caught between the temptation to leave their children behind and the daily reminder of their maternal responsibilities. They see themselves thus relegated to their now preponderant role as mother.

Reinvesting the maternal role with sense: a generational rupture

17 After the men’s departure, the women’s investment of their material role, to the detriment of other social roles, was first seen as a submission. Yet several months later, they seem to reappropriate their situation. They often express a very critical attitude, on the basis of this model of maternity, towards the model respected by previous generations, and take a different stance with their commitment to education, condemnation of physical violence, and refusal to leave their children with other women.

18 The wives of migrants take special pride in their children’s scholastic success, since offering them access to education is often presented as one of the key objectives for the men’s emigration, as has been seen in other migratory contexts (Herrera, Carrillo, 2009):
migration by the father is expected to pay for schooling and facilitate the learning of English. The importance of such an investment in education can be seen in how much attention the women pay to the children’s efforts at school. They organize their day around accompanying them to and from school to ensure that they attend and to protect them from potential dangers in the streets of Mexico City. In addition, they supervise homework and interact with the teachers. They steadfastly refuse to let their children work and judge harshly women who do not take the same position. However, many Otomi children do contribute to the family revenues by selling sweets and cigarettes in the street. The poverty in which many families find themselves justifies this form of child labour, as does a sense of work ethic which comes from their rural background where the socialization of the child through work is more important than that offered by school (Rojas-Cortes, 2010). On the other hand, the migrants’ wives, with support from their husbands, see education in another way, quite different from that of their own behaviour: all the women interviewed had worked during their childhood and none continued their studies after primary school.

Refusal to use physical discipline on their children to ensure obedience is also part of their criticism of practices used by previous generations. The migrants’ wives talk about and condemn the violence that they suffered during their own childhood and are careful to change their own. Left alone in Mexico City with four small children and at the end of her tether, Regina turned to a psychologist for help in finding different ways to make her children obey.

Finally, these women were raised in families where migration to the city was common practice, their mothers going to work in the city as hawkers or domestics (Arizpe, 1975; Oehmichen Bazán, 2005; Pérez-Ruiz, 2008). In the absence of their parents, they were placed with close relatives for short or long periods. Adelia was ‘sold’, in her words, to an aunt in town who ‘exploited’ and beat her. In the light of this experience, staying with their children, for these women, takes on new meaning. “I don’t want anything to happen to them. My children are all I have left. And I know that no one will look after them as well as me” (Adelia, 2006).

Distancing themselves from the norms of maternity that still predominate in their village of origin has forced these women to embark on a profound reflection on their own life. This can be seen in their use of terms such as ‘surpassing myself’, ‘apprenticeship’, ‘independence’ which occur often during the interviews. They also indicate a rupture with previous generations: hawking in the street has come to symbolize a model of child-rearing that they reject. As Adelia says, “I don’t want that for my children, see them living in the streets. I want them to be different. I don’t think the same as other women. ... I don’t live the way they did in the past, and I don’t want to” (Adelia, 2007). It is in this reference to previous generations, rather than to their spouse, that conflicts have arisen and transformed the sense of being a mother for these wives of migrants to the United States.

All the women interviewed accept this concept of “the good mother”, as do other female community members living with their husbands in Mexico City. As a consequence, we should look for factors other than international migration to explain this change of model. The intergenerational and cumulative dimension of the migratory experience is of course a key factor. In her study of a Mexican village where there has been extensive international migration for several generations, Gail Mummert has shown how the concept of the ideal father has evolved from one generation to another because of the
experience of migration. Raised in families where their own father was often absent and emotionally distant, the younger men, when they become migrants in their turn, are determined not to be just ‘mandate dads’ (padres de cheque): they give greater importance to communicating with their children and wives left behind (Mummert, 1999). In Mexico City, the women interviewed frequently talked about their regrets and suffering because they did not know their parents. According to Gail Mummert’s analysis, we can see that this change of attitude is the result of their reflections about their own childhood experiences in families where the parents were migrants.

There is another important, economic, factor that influences these attitudes. It is much easier for these women to criticize hawkers when their own husband provides them with a salary and makes it possible for them to stop working: the husbands are tradesmen or work supervisors with a better social position than the rest of the group. In general, migrants manage to send sufficient money – about $300 dollars on average – to cover daily expenses: any additional income provided by the women is therefore not essential. In addition, the men’s decision to migrate is proof of their desire to develop a different lifestyle. Even if this analysis might need to be corroborated by a more extensive field study, it may be that conflicts over what is “a good mother” and rejections of hawking are in fact linked to the emergence of social and economic stratification within the Otomi group.

Does the absence of men influence these reflections by their spouses? Adelia thinks so, “Sometimes, when I think about it, I tell myself that I have learnt a lot, I have made progress. If my husband hadn’t left, would I have been like those other women? Would I see the world differently?” (Adelia, 2009). Male migration to the United States could thus be seen as a lever for two types of transformation. In assuming their role as mothers, migrants’ wives increase their awareness of their capacity to act, take decisions, and break with certain norms and, by having more freedom to manage their time and by accentuating their isolation within their group of origin, they become susceptible to exploring alternative areas of socialization. Another factor is the influence of social workers and associations such as the Colibri Centre to which the migrants’ wives are particularly exposed. I will return to this point below.

The city or an opportunity to choose ‘another family’

Taking into account the notion of ‘care circulation’ (Herrera, 2013), the literature on distance parenting has shown that, in countries of origin, strategies of familial solidarity are redeployed in order to share responsibility for childcare and thus to compensate for the absence of a parent. Where do migrants’ wives find material and emotional support and what opportunities are available in the urban environment? Here, we can see two different options for the reconfiguration of family links: on the one hand, new relationships are created within the extended family while, on the other, new forms of family emerge and blur the distinction between biological family and practical family.

In the countryside, the prevalent norm dictates that the wife moves in with her husband’s family, even though this practice is being increasingly challenged (Mummert, 1999). It often leads to a conflictual relationship between the migrant’s wife and her in-laws, in particular her mother-in-law. In Mexico City, on the other hand, women say that close relatives, whether from their own or their husband’s family, are not very present in their daily life. This can in part be explained by the location of these relatives: the home
village, various districts in Mexico City, other Mexican cities, or the United States. The women also talk about differences in overall attitudes: "My family, they are very ignorant, very close-minded. I talk to them, but they do not understand me", said Sabina (two children, alone for two years, Mexico City, 2006). In fact, Sabina’s family is not so absent since she has a sister in Mexico City who sometimes looks after her children and a brother who accompanies her on long bus rides. Thus, we see that women take advantage of this lack of proximity to select family members who will help them and use the excuse of distance to limit their interaction with a brother-in-law or sister-in-law with whom they have less affinity. Meetings of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law do not appear to occur regularly. Thus, living conditions in the big city make it possible for women not only to avoid the obligation to live with her husband’s family, but also to develop closer relationships with relations who share their vision of the world.

Most of the women receive support from social workers and especially those working at Colibri, which has a good reputation with the Otomi group. Colibri offers migrants’ wives a place for socialization: they can go there without worrying about gossip. The majority of these women participates assiduously in Colibri’s workshops and volunteer to do a few hours of housework/cleaning. The association promotes a ‘modern’ and gendered vision of sexual equality that contributes to the reflections expressed by the indigenous women: the association’s key personnel are women; its offices provide a place for meeting young interns and volunteers from other social classes and countries who propose alternative conceptions of sexual social roles. The women confirm that they find emotional support at Colibri, “It is like having another family. Because every time something happens to me, they ask me questions. They are caring. For me, that is very important. I have my family here in Mexico City, but they see things differently” (Adelia, 2009). Adelia’s statement is significant: Colibri’s staff has become ‘the other family’, the chosen family that symbolizes the transition between indigenous and urban society.

We should also note the importance of the urban context in the women’s mobilization of family links: geographical distance and the presence of alternative areas of sociability where they can establish strong friendships allow them to take advantage of opportunities for autonomy in making use of family relationships in their daily lives. Here we can see that the emergence of a process of reconfiguration between biological family and social family, as suggested in anthropological studies of family relations in other contexts. The family is seen not only in terms of parental links (biological family) but also, more broadly, in terms of the material and affective dimension of shared daily life and domestic economy (social family) (Fine, 2002; Weber, 2005).

The efforts made by women to choose a biological or social family in which they function daily are indicators of a much broader process for developing their autonomy. The length of time the husband is absent is a determining factor: as time passes, the brutal readjustment of roles that tended to enclose women in their role of mother, to the quasi-exclusion of other social roles, is tempered by friendships that the women create and the new social spaces that they can invest. These exchanges provide encouragement because they contribute to the women’s interpretation of their role as a ‘present mother’.

Conclusion

When women learn to become mothers in the absence of fathers, their obligation to be continually present with the children, which is imposed by their husband’s migration,
takes on new meaning. The image of urban migrants’ wives in working class areas is in stark contrast to observations in rural communities: far from gaining access to the local political scene or the job market, the women in this study have withdrawn from the public arena and the workplace and settled into a life that focuses on their home and their role as mother.

I propose to qualify the model of “present maternity” that is used for women carrying out their role as mother. First, this ‘presence’ involves a geographic reference to the father’s absence, as opposed to “distance maternity” where women leave their children behind, the latter being the experience of the mothers of the women interviewed who became internal migrants. Second, ‘presence’ refers to the quality of attention that the women give their children following the departure of their husband and the way that they reorganize their life in order to accompany them throughout their schooling and compensate emotionally for the absence of the father. Third, ‘presence’ refers to the process of subjectivation through which the women assume their maternal role. This reappropriation of a situation that was initially imposed on them by men and led to their relinquishing their own desires (employment, migration) provides women with an opportunity to engage in intergenerational and, possibly, social conflicts within their community over what constitutes ‘good’ practices of maternity in the city.

What is the role of men in this process? As emphasized by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “the migration of men allows women, indeed forces them, to take decisions and become autonomous” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 65). In the group studied here, however, the migrants’ wives are not alone in challenging the models used by previous generations: the absence of men serves as a lever that encourages contestation, even though it is not the only trigger factor. The transformation of family roles must be seen in a much larger context in which previous migratory patterns, insertion in the city, the dynamics of social mobility all play a major role. Indeed, it would be interesting to find out whether the men brought into their marital home a vision of parental roles that has been influenced by their experience in the United States in ways similar to those observed by Ruth Trinidad Galvan in rural communities (Trinidad Galván, 2010). The methodology adopted here, which focuses on the women’s experience, does not provide answers to this question but it could become the subject of future research.

To understand these family rearrangements, we need to take into account temporal and spatial dimensions. Reinventing oneself as a mother in the absence of fathers involves an often difficult period of introspection which takes place over time. It also implies that the women reorganize the solidarity networks to which they can call for help in their daily life. The location of family relations, whether in different city neighbourhoods or partly in the city and partly in the village, produces distinctly different configurations from those described in the literature on rural communities. By reducing the importance of the close family, and in particular of the in-laws, the urban context allows women to have greater latitude in surrounding themselves with people who share their views, whether members of their biological family with whom they have affinity or social workers in an association facilitated by life in the city. This is an amplified notion of the recomposition of family in the daily lives of these women.
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NOTES

1. Translation by Caroline Mackenzie
2. I use the term ‘maternity’ as there is no equivalent in French for the distinction in English between ‘mothering’ which refers to personal and individual experiences of women responding to the needs of their children; and ‘motherhood’ which refers to the historical and social context in which this individual experience occurs (Miller 2005).
3. I.e. living in towns with more than 15,000 inhabitants.
4. The District Federal (DF) has a population of 8 million, including 120,000 Indians, according to the Instituto nacional de estadística y geografía (INEG, 2010) but statistics provided by the Secretaria de Desarrollo Rural y Equidad para las Comunidades (SEDEREC, 2012) indicate a population of 484,000 Indians in the capital. This difference is due to the criteria used to identify Indian populations statistically: language spoken by the individuals or within the home, auto-identification. Otomi is ranked as the third language used in the DF.
5. In the Federal District, 14% of the working indigenous population earns less than the minimum wage, compared to 7% of the Mexican population as a whole; 30% earn between one and two minimum salaries, compared to 26% for all Mexicans (Sederec, 2012).
6. A coyote is a person hired to smuggle people from Mexico in the United States.  
7. The word in Spanish is superarse.

ABSTRACTS

Unlike other studies of ‘distance maternity’ in transnational families, this article will examine the situation of mothers who stay with their children in the absence of their partners involved in long-distance migration. It seeks to understand how the experience of being a mother is transformed by reviewing various dimensions: models of maternity, practices, representations of self. It focuses on Mexican families living in working class neighbourhoods in order to analyze the impact in urban areas. Based on an ethnographic study carried out in Mexico with indigenous families, the article highlights several factors in the shifting parental roles within the couple and the family: intergenerational conflicts relating to the definition of norms of maternity, involvement of individuals in ethnic social relationships, geographic dispersal of the family and diversity of characteristic areas of socialization in the city.

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