Gender and Migration in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca

Jeffrey H. Cohen *, Leila Rodriguez **, Margaret Fox ***

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the gendered nature of international and internal migration that originates in the central valleys of Oaxaca, Mexico. Our goals are to define migration patterns and outcomes for Oaxacan women from the central valleys region and note the differences that mark migrant men and women. We use ethnographic data from anthropological research in 12 of Oaxaca’s central valley communities to argue that local concepts of what defines correct behaviour (for both men and women) are critical to the outcomes and the differences that exist in the practices of migrant men and women.

Thinking about the place of gender in the process of migration is problematic in discussions of rural Oaxaca, Mexico. It is not that we forget about gender and migration in the state (Howell, 1999; Rees and Coronel Ortiz, 2005; Stephen, 1991; Wodon, et al., 2003). Rather, when the topic is Oaxacan migration to the United States that originates in the central valley region, we are focused on a process that is overwhelmingly about men (for a historical parallel see Donato 1993). In a recently completed ethnographic study of 12 communities in Oaxaca’s central valleys, we found that 60 per cent of all migrants from the area were destined for the United States, and the majority of those migrants (78%) were men (Cohen, 2004; Cohen, et al., 2003). Given such a bias, it is easy to forget that Oaxacan women migrate across the border to US destinations. Furthermore, the emphasis on US-bound migration (what is often described as transnational,
Kearney 2000) often limits our appreciation of internal migration of Oaxacans to diverse destinations within Mexico (see Hirabayashi, 1993).

In this paper, we use ethnographic and survey data collected in 12 central valley communities to examine the men and women who migrate to internal and international destinations. We have two goals. First, we describe migration patterns and outcomes for Oaxacans from the central valleys region; and second, we note the differences between the experiences of men and women as they migrate to internal as well as international destinations. Our findings suggest that migration outcomes are dependent on sending household organization and cultural attitudes concerning who should and who should not migrate.

THE CENTRAL VALLEYS OF OAXACA

The central valleys of Oaxaca surround Oaxaca City, the state’s capital; and include the Centro, Etla, Ocotlán, Tlacolula and Zimatlán districts. Communities in the central valleys are relatively well off when compared to the rest of the state.¹ They are linked to Oaxaca City through bus and taxi service and local economies are tied to the city and in particular the city’s tourism industries.² The Etla valley lies to the west/northwest of Oaxaca City and includes San Juan del Estado (27 km), and Guadalupe Etla (19km). South of the city in the Ocotlán-Zimatlan valleys are the communities of San Martin Tilcajete (23 km) and Santa Inez Yatzche (40 km). Finally, to the east and in the Tlacolula valley are Santa Maria Guelace (23 km), San Juan Guelavia (37 km), Villa Diaz Ordaz (40 km), San Lorenzo Albarradas (68 km) and San Juan del Rio (80 km).

Central valley communities share many features. Brick, adobe and cement block homes of one or two stories with red tile roofs radiate in standard block grids from central plazas. Central plazas are constructed around churches, governmental buildings and small market areas, and often include basketball courts, a band shelter and other public spaces.

Circling these communities are farmlands that are critical to the survival of migrant as well as non-migrant households.³ Approximately 70 per cent of the migrant households we visited, interviewed and surveyed continued to rely upon farming. Typically households farmed 1 ¾ hectares of land that is usually, but not always, classified as non-irrigated or temporal. When rains are regular, households produce an average of six months of the maize they need for family consumption and thereby relieve some of the pressure on wage labour and remittances to cover expenses (see Cohen and Rodriguez, 2005; VanWey, et al., 2005).
Central valley communities have experienced increases in their populations in recent decades. For the communities described here, the populations increased from 19,254 individuals in 1950 to 33,261 in 2000 (INEGI, 2002; SEN, 1953). This increase has come with a parallel rise in the demand for wage labour, schooling, services (electricity, running water) and medical care. Unfortunately, community infrastructures are underdeveloped and the local market for labour remains limited. Accordingly, there are few opportunities for wage labour, few doctors, poor schools and limited access to market goods.

Wage work available in the state is often low paying. The Mexican government defines a living wage as two times the daily minimum wage which has hovered around US $ 10 since the late 1990s in the state of Oaxaca. On average, 71 per cent of Oaxaca’s households made less than the minimum; in other words, less than US $ 20 a day (CONAPO, 2000; DIGEPO, 1999). Among the communities surveyed in this project, the percentage of households making less than a living wage ranged from a low of 59 per cent in San Guadalupe Etla to a high of 94 per cent in Santa Inés Yatzeche (see table 1).

### TABLE 1: MINIMUM WAGE RATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Percentage of the population earning twice the minimum wage or less</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guadalupe Etla</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Del Estado</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Del Río</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Guelavia</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Lorenzo Albarradas</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Martín Tilcajete</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pablo Huitzo</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pedro Ixtlahuaca</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana Del Valle</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Inés Yatzeche</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa María Guelace</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villa Díaz Ordaz</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DIGEPO 1999

Infrastructure in the communities is problematic, and access to basic services like water and sewers continues to lag (CONAPO, 2000). Where improvements occur, they are largely self-funded or funded through a combination of local and state monies, and through Federal programmes including dos por uno (Alarcón 2002; Orozco 2002). In lieu of federal funds, and sometimes in addition to those funds village leaders will assess fees that must be paid by community households. Cooperación is one dimension of the traditional model of social organization and
control that Oaxacans rely upon and that are found in most rural communities (Cohen, 1999: 118). The state describes this system as *usos y costumbres* (literally, uses and customs—but more accurately, traditional practices) and they contrast with party politics that are found in larger cities and Mexico in general (see Fox and Aranda, 1996).

**METHODOLOGY**

Ethnographic and survey research focused on migration history and remittance outcomes in 11 randomly selected communities and was collected from 2000-2004. Ethnographic data from Santa Ana del Valle, where additional research has been carried out since the early 1990s, was also added to bring the total number of communities studied to 12. The communities selected included Spanish-speaking Mestizo villages (Guadalupe Etlá, San Juan del Estado, San Lorenzo Albarradas, San Martín Tilcajete, San Pablo Huitzo and San Pedro Ixtlahuaca) and Zapotec-speaking, indigenous villages (San Juan del Río, San Juan Guelavia, Santa Ana del Valle, Santa Inés Yatzeche, Santa Maria Guelace and Villa Díaz Ordaz), and supported the comparison of outcomes across the two groups. In each community a random sample of households was interviewed (approximately 15% of a community’s households). In total, 590 households were visited and interviews were conducted with the male and female household heads (see table 2). Households whose members refused to participate were replaced.

<p>| TABLE 2: MOVES AND MIGRATIONS FOR 11 OAXACAN COMMUNITIES |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Households Surveyed</th>
<th>Non-migrant Households</th>
<th>Commuter Household</th>
<th>Internal Migrant Households</th>
<th>U.S. Migrant Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guadalupe Etlá</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Inés Yatzeche</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan del Estado</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Guelavia</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan del Río</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Lorenzo Albarradas</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Maria Guelace</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Martin Tilcajete</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pablo Huitzo</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pedro Ixtlahuaca</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villa Diaz Ordaz</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey applied in these communities was organized following the framework developed by Massey for the Mexico Migration Project (Massey, 1987). The surveys were collected in rural households by a researcher rather than distributed to informants as illiteracy remains a problem. The survey included closed- and open-ended questions that focused on household organization and demography, work and migration experience, goods and services in the home, community
participation, and budgeting, among other topics. The household survey was supplemented with ethnographic interviews that were further combined with participant observation, and the collection of additional community information (interviews with local leaders, the collection of oral histories, and visits to state archives including INEGI, the National Institute for Statistics, Geography and Information). In a second study conducted in 2003, a questionnaire was developed to explore attitudes among Oaxacans (migrants and non-migrants) concerning migration, destinations, gender, and remittance use. This cultural consensus study was based upon the assumption that culture “consists of shared cognitive representations” that individuals can describe in normative rather than personal terms (Romney, et al., 1995: 4699). We interviewed 30 individuals in San Juan Guelavia and Guadalupe Etla in 2003.

MIGRATION PATTERNS AND GENDERED OUTCOMES IN OAXACA’S CENTRAL VALLEYS

While Oaxacans are underrepresented among Mexicans entering the United States, their presence in the migration stream has increased since the late 1980s (Cornelius, 1992; Rivera-Salgado, 1999; Wodon, et al., 2003). Following the economic crises in Mexico in the 1990s, international migration from the state (defined here as migration from Oaxaca to the United States that takes the migrant away from her or his home and hometown for at least one year) truly accelerated. By the year 2000, approximately 14 per cent of the state’s communities had high or very high rates of migration, while 93 per cent of the state’s communities noted at least some migration (CONAPO, 2002).

Communities in the state’s central valley region showed a range of migration outcomes from the very high rates of out-migration evident in San Juan Guelavia, where 67 per cent of the community’s households included migrants travelling to internal or international destinations, to the more moderate rate in San Pedro Ixtlauhoca, where only about 22 per cent of the village’s households included migrants (see Cohen, 2004; Hulshof, 1991; Iszaevich, 1988).

In addition to migrating to internal destinations such as Mexico City and the United States (particularly Los Angeles, California), Oaxacans also move between their villages and the state’s capital following daily commutes to jobs in the city’s service sector. At least 21 per cent of the households we surveyed included individuals who commuted daily for work and schooling in the city (see Murphy and Stepick, 1991).
The decision to migrate to an internal or international destination is made by the individual migrant, usually in response to the real and perceived needs of the members of a sending household. These needs are often economic—the household head is searching for higher wages, the physical household is in need of repair, or the goods and services that the members of a household desire are beyond the means of those individuals as defined by local wage work (Fomby, 2005; Wodon, et al., 2003). Using logistical regression models we found that three independent variables were significant predictors of migration (whether to an internal or an international destination) and included first, the overall size of the household (the total number of members in the household); second, connections to migrants settled in destination communities; and third, the goods (as a proxy for wealth) owned by a family (Cohen, et al., 2003: 375).

Female migrants to the United States often came from larger households overall. In addition, there was a significant correlation between women who migrated to the United States and from households with male members engaged in wage work in Oaxaca City. In fact, nearly all of the women who migrated to the United States came from homes where their fathers worked in the city. The work status of the mother of a migrant bound for the United States was not significant and did not correlate with migration rates to internal or international destinations.

The economics behind the decision to migrate are clearly expressed in the motivations that most Oaxacans cite in their decision to cross the border. In fact, 92 per cent of the household heads we interviewed identified covering the costs of daily life as the most important reason to cross the border. An additional 57 per cent noted that organizing resources for home construction or home improvements were valid reasons to migrate, while 12 per cent felt that remittances should go to business start-ups and investments. Only 1 per cent of Oaxacans believed migrations should be made as a way to have an adventure or “get-away” from a household.

**INTERNAL MIGRATION**

Once the decision to migrate was made, the migrant typically followed one of two paths leaving for an internal or international destination. Very few households (approximately 6%) sent migrants to internal as well as international destinations simultaneously. Internal (Mexican) destinations included urban centres like Mexico City, where wage work is typically available, and the state of Baja California, where agricultural work can be found. Men and women of various ages—but usually in their early twenties and with families—migrated
to these destinations. Of the 140 individuals who described migrating to internal destinations, 55 per cent were men and 45 per cent were women. Of this group, 44 per cent of the men and 46 per cent of the women followed kin and community-based networks to their destinations, and 43 per cent lived with relatives once settled. Of the internal migrants we identified, 75 per cent settled in Mexico City and 18 per cent settled in Baja California, while others moved to cities like Tapachula, Chiapas or the resorts of Cancun and Acapulco.

Internal movers stayed in their destination communities for an average of 11 years and sent monetary remittances home about half of the time they were away (with insignificant differences between the lengths of stay for men and women). Remittances from women who travelled to other parts of Mexico averaged about US$ 50 a month and men travelling within the country typically returned US$ 65 on average. Service work was the norm for most women; 46 per cent found service jobs while 7 per cent found professional positions in health care, as paralegals, and in management. Only about a quarter of the men who moved to internal destinations found service work, while 14 per cent found professional jobs. Other typical jobs included agricultural work in Baja California, technical work and careers in politics and education.

INTERNATIONAL-US-BOUND MIGRATION

Migrants bound for the United States were more homogeneous in their make-up and practices than internal movers. Nearly 80 per cent of all international movers were men who were typically 22 years of age. Overall, 62 per cent depended upon kin and community-based networks to reach their destinations. Additionally, although a small group overall, 60 per cent of the women who crossed the US border followed an earlier migrant (their father or brother) to their destination. Los Angeles, California attracted the majority of movers from the central valleys, with 94 per cent settled in the area. Most migrants settled in the United States lived with relatives (70% overall), although women were slightly more likely to live with family and friends than were men.

Most migrants to the United States were male household heads supporting young children. Their trips to the United States averaged 8 years, whereas the trips of women migrants averaged only 2 years (see below). However, overall most migrants through 2001 typically migrated for one year at a time, rotating between their hometowns in Oaxaca and migrant neighbourhoods in the Los Angeles area. Following the events of September 11th, 2001 in the United States a tightening of US borders and an increase in security, migrants have tended to stay in the United States for longer periods of time. According to informal discussions with former and current migrants, more Oaxacans now choose to remain in the United

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States for longer stays because they fear arrest and harassment on either side of the border by US and/or Mexican security forces.

Once settled in the United States, migrants tended to remit funds home for about half of their stay. Men remitted an average of US$ 540 and women returned US$ 260 on average per month (typically remittances were sent bi-monthly by wire service). Most central valley migrants who have settled in the United States found work in southern California’s service industry. Of the 224 men who had migrated or were in the United States, 53 per cent worked in the service industry, particularly in restaurants, 7 per cent found work in factories, 12 per cent were employed in agriculture, and the rest were in various jobs that were not described. For the 57 women who were in the United States or had migrated, 56 per cent were employed in service or domestic work, 7 per cent were employed in agriculture, and the remainder in various jobs that were not described.

Monetary remittances from migrant men and women based in the United States were put to similar uses. Although men remitted more and over longer periods then did women, a son was likely to stop remitting if he married in the United States. Most monetary remittances from the United States went to covering daily expenses in Oaxaca (44%) and home improvements (17%). Only 14 per cent of the households we surveyed received no remittances. Health care, education, ritual expenses and the purchase of consumer goods accounted for little of the total returned by migrants (see table 3), and only 5 per cent of remittances went to business start-ups and expansions (for discussion of investments see Cohen and Rodriguez, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3: REMITTANCES USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No remittances received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home construction/renovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of domestic items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of agricultural/farm goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business start-up and expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN WHO MIGRATE WITHIN MEXICO

There are real differences in the experiences that men and women have when they migrate to internal as well as international destinations. The bias toward male migration to the United States is certainly obvious—particularly in terms
of the sheer numbers of men who cross the border. Nevertheless, the differences that mark gendered outcomes for internal and international migrations are not defined solely by the number of migrants who move to the United States or by the experiences of migrants at the point of destination. Gendered differences do reflect variations in experiences of men and women as migrants and workers as they settle in receiving communities, but they also reflect differences in socio-cultural expectations and the cultural beliefs that characterize traditional gendered practices in the rural Oaxacan household (Howell, 2002; Stephen, 1993).

As Hirsch (2003: 189) notes, migration for most Mexican men is viewed as a “necessary extension” of their household responsibilities. Men move as new husbands and young fathers to organize the resources necessary to build homes, educate children and plan for the future. Typically, men would respond to questions about their migrations with a statement like, “this is what I have to do for my family”. The point is not that all Oaxacan men migrate to support their families, or even that those that do migrate to support a family always succeed. Rather, Oaxacan men wrap themselves in their identity as providers and see their efforts as migrants (whether in the United States or within Mexico) as an important avenue to securing the well-being of their family. Even migrant men who fail as they cross the border and others who spend their earnings on their own needs rather then their family will often describe their efforts as an attempt to support and better the household.

Women face a very different situation as they struggle with the decision to migrate. Migration is not framed as a necessary extension of home life. In fact, many Oaxacans see migration as a threat to the very roles women are assigned locally. Traditional roles for women in rural Oaxaca revolve around the household and its physical and spiritual maintenance. Women ideally serve as caretakers and the work they may do around their homes (for example making and selling tortillas, an activity that can bring a substantial income) are often extensions of their role as housewives. Migrant Oaxacan women, whether they live in Mexico or across the border in the United States, are forced to balance their moves away from their sending households and the stresses that come from their sojourns with the continue pressure to serve as central figures in their familial networks (see Kanaiaupuni, 2000). This often means that migrant women continue to care for and feed other migrants (often male relatives) while taking responsibility for the migrant home and at the same time holding a job and remitting funds. McGuire (2006:373) describes the situation as one where Oaxacan women are forced not only to cross national (or physical) boundaries, but cultural and socioeconomic borders that exacerbate inequalities (cultural, economic and gendered) even as the move can create new opportunities.
Men migrating internally find work opportunities that are not present locally and many argued that leaving home was the only way to find wage and salary work. Although, the point was often made as follows, “what is there for me in Oaxaca? Nothing! If I want to use my ability I need to leave to do well. I would like to stay, but I can’t!” For at least some rural Oaxacan men, internal migration creates an opportunity to put training to practice. In fact, 14 per cent of the men moving to a destination city in Mexico found professional work and just under 30 per cent were involved in service work, while only 4 per cent were involved in agricultural labour. Rural Oaxacan women do not find as broad a range of jobs as they move internally. Migrating to internal destinations, women find that the jobs available to them are circumscribed by beliefs concerning what is women’s work and how women are paid. As a result, 56 per cent were employed in domestic settings. In these situations, women are burdened not only by gendered expectations of what is and is not correct work, but also by racist and bigoted assumptions that urban Mexicans often make concerning what rural and indigenous Mexicans from states like Oaxaca are capable of (see McGuire, 2006). Thus, most Oaxacan women bound for Mexico City find work as maids, a role that does not threaten Oaxacan or Mexican concepts of womanhood (Howell, 2002) and certainly plays into assumptions that employers make concerning the abilities of the rural women they hire.

The concept of what women should or should not do, and what they can and cannot do, also reflects rural Oaxacan concepts of gender. This occurs in at least two ways. First, there is the belief among Oaxacans that a woman’s role is largely defined by the household in which she works and the family that she must still support. Thus, families will often send their daughters to positions in households in Mexican cities outside of Oaxaca and to jobs that fit the local ideals of what a woman should do. Second, the market for maids in Mexican cities is large and rural Oaxacan women easily fit into the jobs that are available. They are doing a job they did in their natal home, their employers assume that they are docile and that they are clearly at ease in the kitchen, and therefore Oaxacan women are non-threatening as they enter a stranger’s home for work.

All migrants bound for internal destinations remitted funds to their sending homes at levels quite a bit lower than most internationally-bound migrants. Nevertheless, women bound for internal destinations typically remitted less than men. There appear to be three reasons that women who migrate to internal destinations remit at rates lower than men. First, women in domestic positions within households live with their employers and earn less as they are given room and board. Typical was the response of Señora Lorenza in San Juan del Estado. She had spent many years working and living with one family in Mexico City. She had left for Mexico hoping to support her son after the death of her husband. Her son lived with his
maternal aunt and as he came of age, worked along side his uncle as a farmer. Señora Lorenza had little to show for the years spent in Mexico City and when we asked her to describe her remittances she responded, “I sent some money when I could, but it was never much. And look [gestures to her sewing machine]; this is really what I have for my efforts. This sewing machine is the only thing I brought home [with me]. I use it now to earn a little money, but it isn’t much for the years I spent in Mexico City” (interviewed July 2000).

Employers create an “illusion of familial belonging” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 129) when they offer room and board to domestic employees. This works to the advantage of the employer who can then use the rhetoric of the family to incorporate domestic workers. It also plays into the fears and expectations of families and parents in Oaxaca who want to see their daughters in jobs that will not place them in threatening and unmanageable situations. Don Umberto and Doña Carolina who were in their 60s and lived in Santa Ana del Valle and had one daughter in Mexico City (as well as several sons in the United States) were typical of many parents we interviewed. Here was a couple that had never ventured beyond the central valleys; in fact, they seldom went beyond the market in Tlacolula and Don Umberto described his first trips to Oaxaca City (35 km to the west) as a grand, all day adventure. When they talked about first sending their daughter to Mexico City they mentioned feeling nervous and scared, “Where could our daughter go? Would she ever come home? What would happen to her?” In the end, Gloria worked for a family as a maid for several years and would return home during fiestas—if she was given time off. She only stopped working for the family when her relationship with a Santañero (a citizen of the village) who was leaving for the United States led to her pregnancy. Now she is the wife of a migrant and she manages her household (including two young daughters) while her husband works as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles, California. Tired and stressed from managing her home without the presence of her husband, she moved in with her parents and used the remittances sent by her husband Hector to purchase the goods necessary to build their home (something they began in 2000). One afternoon, in 1996, while interviewing the members of the household, I asked her, “Can’t you use the money he sends home to buy food?”

Gloria replied:

“No, he wants me to save as much of his money as I can. He didn’t go to feed us; he wants to build our house. He would be really angry if I spent the money on food or clothes”.

“Would you like to join him in the United States?” I asked.
“Well, seriously, yes, but I can’t. I need to stay here. Who would watch our babies if I went to the other side [the United States]? What would I do? The work is too hard over there”.

I followed this exchange and asked why she thought the situation was different, “Wouldn’t it be like your time in Mexico City? You could do that kind of work”.

“No, it isn’t the same there. The work is hard and I can’t leave my kids. Hector is with his brother, he is okay, I talk to him [on the phone], but this is not an easy situation. It is hard to manage and my parents are getting older”.

The “illusion of belonging” and working in a familial setting assuages some of the fears that challenge a women’s migration by making her an extended member of a family rather than an employee. Gloria creates such an illusion when she talks about the years she spent working for the same family and while she describes her time as challenging (long hours, hard work and little reward), she also told us that she felt safe and was not abused (although, as others have documented, such settings often lead to sexual and psychological abuse; see Howell, 2002). The United States, on the other hand, was a mystery that would take Gloria away from her integrated roles as mother, daughter and caretaker.

The wage gap that exists in Mexico is also informed by gender discrimination. Social and cultural beliefs as well as the history of labour in Mexico mean that women earn less for their efforts than do their male counterparts (Artecona and Cunningham, 2002; Gilbertson, 1995; Parrado and Flippen, 2005). Finally, and this is critical as well for US-bound women, migrant women, like Mexican women in general, are expected to care for their families, cook, clean and take responsibility for most domestic chores even as they work outside the home. Thus, women who settle within Mexico and do not live with their employer return home after a day’s work to prepare meals and to clean and care for their husbands, fathers, brothers and co-villagers.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN WHO MIGRATE TO THE UNITED STATES

The variables that were predictive of migration for rural Oaxacan women did not differ significantly from those that motivated Oaxacan men. Furthermore, the motivations for men and women to migrate across the border are clearly what Hirsch (2003) describes as a “necessary extension” of their household responsibilities. Nevertheless, while the men we talked to and learned about
migrated as young household heads often supporting newly established families, women migrated as daughters sent across the border to support their natal homes.

Length of stay was quite different among migrant men and women who travelled to the United States. Women typically made only one trip to the United States and no more than three sojourns in total. Women remained in the United States for an average of about two years while men stayed for an average of eight years (although these years were not spent consecutively in the United States). To get to the United States, migrant women depended upon their families to fund their moves (see Pries, 2004). Women, like men, settled with friends and relatives; however, women were more likely to settle with family members rather than friends or co-villagers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many women described their situation as one where they moved into caretaker roles in their destination households, entering social positions where they were made to balance wage work with the domestic care of everyone in the household (see Wakabayashi and Donato, 2005). For at least some of the women we met, this situation proved too stressful and they returned within a year to their natal homes in Oaxaca. Maria Sánchez Garcia (22, from Villa Díaz Ordáz) talked about how she was forced to care for two of her brothers who were settled in the United States. The combination of domestic housework and a daily job as a maid in a hotel proved overly stressful and after only about six months in the United States, she returned to Oaxaca. Even though her trip was short, she earned enough during her time in the United States to refurbish the kitchen and construct a modern bathroom for her parents.

Remittances rates were quite different among men and women (US$ 280 a month for women, versus US$ 530 a month for men). While women remitted far less overall than did men, women were more likely to remit. Approximately 14 per cent of the men working in the United States did not send regular remittances home, while just less than 2 per cent of the women failed to remit. Sometimes the failure was expected. Once a migrant was living in the United States with his or her own family, remittances often stopped. Other times, a migrant had only recently crossed the border and was not ready to remit. Finally, some Oaxacans “disappeared” and severed most connections with their sending community—although there were few instances of such occurrences.

Money remitted by migrants living and working in the United States generally went to covering costs of living in the sending household (44%), while an additional 17 per cent of all remittances from both men and women went to cover the renovation or construction of a home (see table 2). Other funds remitted by migrants in the United States were divided as follows: 6 per cent to education, 4
per cent to the purchase of electronic goods ranging from blenders to refrigerators, washer and dryers, 5% for business start-ups (opening a tienda for example) or the expansion of a business. At least some of these dollars went to businesses started by women in the region and included beauty salons and several tiendas. Generally, there was no difference in the ways in which the remittances of men and women were used.

**DISCUSSION**

Migration outcomes are different for men and women in at least three key ways, even though the motivations to migrate are largely the same. First, men outnumber women as migrants particularly to destinations in the United States; second, women typical migrate as daughters supporting natal homes, while men migrate as husbands (or in anticipation of marriage) and to support the establishment of their new households; and third, men remit more dollars home. How can we explain these differences? Certainly, some migrants and their sending households acknowledged that men worked and earned money at rates almost double that of women, but few families actually suggested that wages and earnings were an issue in the decision to migrate. Furthermore, no one suggested that they chose to specifically send a son across the border because he would earn more than a daughter. To better understand the motivations for sending sons and daughters to the United States, we focused on the cultural norms that surround rural Oaxacans as they think about migration and who makes an effective migrant.

Most people, regardless of their gender and regardless of their social status (married, single, with migrants in the household or without), believed that migration, and in particular migration to the United States, placed women in physical danger and at risk. Fathers and mothers clearly articulated this point, telling us that a daughter’s honour was at risk if she left as a migrant. The fears that characterize assumptions about migration were clear in statements like those made by Don Umberto and quoted above. Doña Ofelia, the wife of a dairy farmer in Guadalupe Etla made a similar point: “Who would watch over my daughter if she went? It is better to send a young man” (interviewed in 2003, Guadalupe Etla).  

When we asked Oaxacans to rank potential migrants to the United States, young, single males and male household heads were nearly four times more likely to be chosen than were single mothers. They were also 2.5 times more likely to be chosen then were daughters and twice as likely to be chosen than were young, single females. When we asked the same question of internal migrations, we also discovered a bias toward male centred migration, although much less pronounced. Now, young single males and male household heads were a little more than twice
as likely to be chosen then were single mothers, and approximately 1.5 times as likely to be chosen to migrate than were young women and daughters. Finally, we asked Oaxacans to also rank people as potential commuters. When it came to moves within the area--that is from a natal home in the central valleys to Oaxaca City for work and education-- there was no significant difference between outcomes for young men, male household heads, young women, single mothers, or daughters. In fact, several household heads argued that sending children to Oaxaca City was critical to their future success and several families in towns that were near the city (San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Guadalupe Etl a and San Juan del Estado) included children who were students at the Instituto Tecnológico de Oaxaca.

Our findings suggest rural Oaxacans approach international, internal migration, and commutes differently. Commuting is safe and does not take the mover out of their local cultural system. In fact, it can empower the child who travels to Oaxaca City for advanced training (see discussion in Howell, 1999). Internal moves are tricky. For young men, they are an extension of their traditional responsibilities. For young women, work is available that is also framed in local concepts of what a woman should do. However, restrictions on what women can do and lower wages limit the choices and possibilities open to rural Oaxacan women, leading most to turn to domestic work.

Border crossing is dangerous for all involved, yet because the opportunities are greater (much better pay for service work for example) it is an important choice for young men and an option for at least some young women. Our informants regularly talked about the deaths of migrants on the frontier and how worried they were for their fathers, husbands, sons and daughters who were travelling to, or settled in the United States. Nevertheless, the majority of men working in the United States framed their sojourns as an extension of their normal familial responsibilities. “I did this for my family, to advance them and make their home better” was a statement we heard often from migrant men. Once in the United States, migrant men settled with friends, found work in service or construction and remained in their destination community for eight years, moving back and forth, to and from their homes in rural Oaxaca.

Many migrants to the United States talked about how they are able to sustain their community, earning money to cover the expenses of cooperación and community service through their efforts. While there were clearly moments when migrant men did use their experiences and sometimes their wealth to support community needs (for example, several municipal presidentes learned skills that were critical to their success in the United States), many other migrant men used community participation as a way to extend their stay in the United States. Gutierrez-Najera (2005) makes this point clearly when she describes rural Oaxacan men who had
migrated to the United States and would contribute to the financial health of their community (*cooperación*) but would not return to their natal communities or households.

Women who chose to migrate were generally not discussed by informants. In fact, women who migrated without the support of a household (and as independent actors) were typically described not as migrants but as people who had chosen to leave the community or disappeared. Women who did migrate sometimes found opportunities that were unavailable in Mexico (Parrado and Flippen, 2005), but most often found work in the service industry and as maids in hotels. This was not the domestic work that was present in Mexico, and US-bound women did not typically live with their employers or work for a single family. Nevertheless, domestic and service work did pay well even as it created new and potentially stressful situations. Migrating to the United States put women at risk and in danger in a way that did not make sense given local concepts of how women should behave. The situation was one that left Oaxacan migrant women in stressful and tense situations in relation to their families. On the one hand, they migrated to support their families as a daughter should; on the other, their migrations put them at risk and often involved them in work and activities that were not among those associated with being a good daughter (working away from home, in a public setting where unknown men were often present). Thus, even though it was useful to send a daughter to the United States, as both a caretaker and worker, the outcomes were not simple. The situation was further complicated by the burden most women felt as they managed the domestic needs of their migrant homes in the United States.

Marisol Martinez, from San Juan Guelavia, had lived with her brother in Los Angeles and described the situation succinctly: “I got up early and took the bus to work; I worked all day, all day. Then it was home again and back to it [cooking and cleaning]! It never ended. I got one day off. I didn’t like it, and I cried a lot for my family”. Perhaps it is not a surprise to learn that Señorita Martinez lasted only about one year as a migrant before returning home. Nevertheless, caught with little to do in San Juan Guelavia, she is contemplating a return to the United States and her brother’s home. Ana Garcia Cruz, a 29-year-old single mother from Diaz Ordáz, captures the difficult situation most women found themselves in,

I went after my brothers. They left years ago, and my poor father was suffering. So I joined my brothers in San Diego and began working as a maid for a hotel . . . I only stopped when I became pregnant [she points to her daughter who is a US citizen]. I came home after that, but look at what I did [she shows me a completed modern kitchen and finished bathroom]. I did all of this, not my brothers! I did this for my father and mother, and me.
When I asked Ana if she would return to the United States, she said that she was planning to, but only after her daughter was a little older and they both can safely cross the border. Such statements reveal the pressures that women face as they migrate to the United States.

CONCLUSION

Oaxacan men and women will continue to migrate to the United States and it is likely that the number of women crossing the border will continue to rise. Internal migration will also continue, even though it is a poor substitute for international movement. Unfortunately, there are few signs that migration for Oaxacan women is becoming less stressful. Rather, the profound and powerful assumptions that Oaxacans make about what is and is not correct behaviour for both men and women continue to frame migration outcomes. Men can always fall back on the story that their migrations are done for the good of the family and to encourage the growth and health of the household unit. Women, on the other hand, face a very different set of assumptions. As women leave to migrate, they face unknown situations that do not easily fit the expectations that frame most of their actions. When a woman crosses the border, is she still a caretaker? Alternatively, if she settles in the United States, does that mean she has forsaken her family? The situation is not one that will be easily settled for women from the central valleys; rather, it is likely that the stresses and tensions that come with migration will continue until the very idea of what it is women should and should not do changes.

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NOTES

1 The central valleys are one of eight districts that make up the state. While the central valley’s communities are relatively well off in comparison to those in other districts, Oaxaca regularly ranks as one of the nation’s poorest states (CONAPO, 2000a).

2 INEGI estimates that Oaxacans commuting from central valley communities account for at least 10 per cent of the city’s workforce. Approximately 38 per cent of the state’s workforce is employed in service, transportation and governmental industries while statewide 41 per cent participates in agriculture (INEGI, 2001).

3 Non-migrant households were those that at the time of their interview and/or survey included no members who had left for an internal destination within Mexico or an international destination.

4 INEGI estimates that Oaxacans may account for no more than 4 per cent of the total Mexican population in the United States. Nevertheless, the Oaxacan community in the United States is growing and is rather large in and around Los Angeles, California and the west coast of Oregon (INEGI, 2001).

5 There are migrants (men and women) who choose to leave their homes and sending communities and not return. These migrants are described as “missing” or disappeared by their families. We found that approximately 10 per cent of the migrants we identified were not actively engaged with their sending households (in other words, they did not remit funds and were only sporadically in phone contact with family members).

6 Maximum lengths of stay varied greatly for individuals. While the US-bound migrants spent 8 years on average in the United States, the mode for international movers (men and women) was only 1 year and half of all migrants spent no more than 5 years in the United States. Very few migrants spent more than 10 years cumulatively in the United States (see Cohen, 2004).

7 I first interviewed this couple in 1992 and 1993. I returned in 1996 and again every year (typically during the summer months) from 2000-2006 for follow up interviews. Don Umberto (not his real name) is a key informant and a critical resource as I continue to learn about the region.

8 During our interview, Doña Ofelia began to cry over her children and their futures. Her daughter worked in a small factory nearby, but an older son who had migrated to the United States was only sporadically in touch by phone and was no longer remitting funds. Doña Ofelia described the situation, “He married a girl there and he has his own family to care for now, not us.”
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SEXOSPÉCIFICITÉ ET MIGRATION DANS LES VALLÉES CENTRALES D’OAXACA AU MEXIQUE:

Dans cette étude, nous examinons le caractère sexospécifique de la migration interne et internationale prenant sa source dans les vallées centrales d’Oaxaca au Mexique. Nous nous efforçons de définir les schémas migratoires et ce qui en résulte pour les femmes originaires de la région des vallées centrales d’Oaxaca, en notant les différences entre les migrants hommes et femmes. A cet effet, nous utilisons des données ethnographiques recueillies dans le cadre de recherches anthropologiques menées dans douze communautés des vallées centrales d’Oaxaca, et en tirons la conclusion que les concepts locaux de comportement correct (à la fois pour les hommes et pour les femmes) revêtent une importance fondamentale dans l’appréciation des différences existant entre les pratiques des migrants et des migrantes.

CUESTIONES DE GENERO Y DE MIGRACIÓN EN LOS VALLES CENTRALES DE OAXACA, MÉXICO

En este articulo, se examinan las cuestiones de genero en la migración internacional e interna que se originan en los valles centrales de Oaxaca, México. Ello con el objeto de definir los patrones migratorios y los resultados de los mismos para las mujeres de Oaxaca provenientes de los valles centrales y observar las diferencias existentes entre las mujeres y hombres migrantes. En ese quehacer utilizamos datos etnográficos provenientes de un estudio antropológico efectuado en doce comunidades del valle central de Oaxaca para argumentar que los conceptos locales de lo que ha de definir un comportamiento correcto (tanto como para los hombres como las mujeres) son fundamentales de cara a los resultados y diferencias que existen en las practicas de hombres y mujeres migrantes.