

Chisme across Borders: The Impact of Gossip in a Guatemalan Transnational Community

Jocelyn SKOLNIK

El Sol Jupiter's Neighborhood Resource Center

Sandra LAZO DE LA VEGA

Florida International University

Timothy STEIGENGA

Florida Atlantic University

ABSTRACT

Qualitative interviews in both the Guatemalan Maya sending community of Jacaltenango and the receiving community of Jupiter, Florida, illustrate the gendered role of transnational gossip. Women whose husbands have migrated are subject to a high level of scrutiny from their family and neighbors, who may accuse them of infidelity, raising their children inappropriately, or spending money unwisely. To avoid gossip and its potential consequences, many women isolate themselves to such an extent that they experience psychological and physical symptoms of depression and anxiety. This article contributes to the debate on migration and gender by defining and confirming the gendered nature of transnational gossip, identifying the factors that intensify gossip in the context of international migration, and providing evidence of the specific negative impact for women in the sending community.

Keywords: 1. transnational gossip, 2. gender, 3. social remittances, 4. Guatemala, 5. United States.

El chisme a través de la frontera: El impacto del chisme en una comunidad guatemalteca transnacional

RESUMEN

Entrevistas cualitativas realizadas en Jacaltenango (comunidad maya guatemalteca de emigrantes) y Júpiter (localidad de Florida que recibe inmigrantes jacaltecos) ilustran el rol del chisme transnacional y sus efectos, condicionados por el género. Las esposas de los migrantes están sujetas a un riguroso escrutinio por parte de su familia y vecinos, quienes las acusan de ser infieles, criar mal a los niños y malgastar el dinero. Para evitar el chisme y sus posibles consecuencias, muchas mujeres se aíslan a tal extremo que experimentan síntomas físicos y psicológicos de depresión y ansiedad. Este artículo confirma que el efecto del chisme transnacional está condicionado por el género, identifica los factores que lo intensifican en el contexto de la migración internacional y proporciona evidencia de su efecto negativo en las mujeres de las comunidades de donde proceden los migrantes.

Palabras clave: 1. chisme transnacional, 2. género, 3. remesas sociales, 4. Guatemala, 5. Estados Unidos.

Introduction

My husband went to the U.S. six years ago. My son does not really remember him. The last time he saw his father, my son was a little over a year old; now he is seven. Having my husband in the United States has brought some good things, but it has also brought some negative things to our lives. My son and I live by ourselves. We get very lonely. My son does not have a father figure and I constantly feel very lonesome. As years have gone by, those feelings have continued to accumulate ... As a woman, it has really affected my life. Being alone is very difficult, especially because people around you start rejecting you ... I go to a doctor who helps me through my problems. My doctor tells me in confidence that many women in my situation are going through the same psychological and physical illnesses that I am (Carmen, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

The importance of gender and gender relations in understanding the phenomenon of migration has recently been highlighted in the pages of this journal and elsewhere (Carter, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Silvey, 2006; Sinke, 2006; Vega, 2002; Vidal *et al.*, 2002; Zhou, 2003). Only a few researchers, however, have focused their studies on how migration specifically affects the women who stay in the sending communities (Peña, 1991; Abdulrahim, 1993; Hirsch, 2003; Mahler, 2001; Mahler and Pessar, 2006). Furthermore, studies that do focus on the impact of migration on gender have produced variant and conflicting results. Positive interpretations focus on social remittances regarding gender, new roles for female heads of households, and greater decision making power for women. Negative interpretations point to dependence on remittances and attempts to assert patriarchal control exacerbated by distance and time. Within this literature, there is significant room for further elaboration and testing of the specific mechanisms, processes, and dynamics that mediate the impact of migration on gender relations.¹

¹ It is worth noting that gender also has a significant impact on migration. While migration from Central America to the United States was initially a predominantly male phenomenon, women now make up a growing proportion of Central American migrants to the U.S. For a more detailed account on how the family has become a driving force of migration from Guatemala to the United States see Palma, Girón, and Steigenga (2007).

This research project was initially undertaken to contribute to this debate by evaluating the changes women in Jacaltenango, Guatemala perceived after their spouses migrated. Our open-ended qualitative interviews were structured to evaluate questions about whether Jacalteco women had gained freedom, responsibilities, or autonomy since their spouses migrated. However, as our interviews unfolded, it became clear that although our respondents were willing to share their experiences regarding their work, control over money, independence, etc., there was another essential factor that played a critical role in their relations with their spouses and impacted their daily lives. The women we interviewed cited fear of being subject to gossip and rumors over any perceived gain in autonomy and authority within their households and community.

As Sarah Mahler has argued, the impact of transnational communication on gender relations has received insufficient attention in the broader literature on gender and migration (Mahler, 2001). We seek to address this research gap by examining how transnational gossip affects not only gender relations, but also the quality of life of women who remain in the sending communities. Specifically, we examine the content, impact, and modes of transmission of transnational gossip in the context of the transnational community that links Jupiter, Florida and Jacaltenango. Based on our interviews both in Jacaltenango and Jupiter, we find that fears related to the potential impact of gossip have an asymmetrical impact on women in the sending community. While male migrants are also subject to gossip, fear of gossip significantly circumscribes women's participation in the public sphere in the sending community, imposes limits on women's behavior, and exacerbates anxieties and tensions related to the larger process of migration and separation (Torres, 2008:146; Rosas, 2008:168-170). For most of our female respondents, anxiety over the potential impact of gossip was manifest in specific social, psychological, and even physical symptoms described during their interviews. These findings are important in multiple respects.

First, while the concept of transnational gossip has received some recent attention in the literature on migration (Lang and

Smart, 2002; Dreby, 2009; Torres, 2008; Rosas, 2008), it has not been directly defined. Borrowing from Wert and Salovey's (2004: 122) general definition of gossip, we define transnational gossip as evaluative talk among people who are familiar with each other concerning the personal matters of a third person that is communicated across borders or within a transnational community.

Second, our findings confirm the highly gendered nature of transnational gossip. As Chavez-Arellano, Vázquez, and De la Rosa (2006:5) argue, "the harm that comes from being the object of gossip has a greater impact on women than on men". In general, women take more preventive actions to avoid being gossiped about and are more negatively impacted by the effects of transnational gossip (Torres, 2008:146; Dreby, 2009).

Third, by documenting some of the specific negative effects of transnational gossip, we contribute to the limited literature on the impact of migration on gender relations. Our participants described the physical as well as psychological effects of the isolation they endure to avoid being gossiped about. The increased anxiety, depression and isolation that are a byproduct of migration are issues that health practitioners should be sensitive to in both sending and receiving communities. Future studies evaluating the impact of migration on women who remain in sending communities should look beyond specific financial and daily decision-making roles to examine the larger social context conditioned by migration and transnational gossip. Viewing gender relations through this lens highlights the ambiguity of the impact of migration in sending communities and points to specific negative effects in terms of health and social participation for women. The manner in which Jacalteco women frame their experience with transnational migration provides insights that are frequently lost in larger debates about autonomy, subordination, and empowerment.

Finally, our study sheds light on how the process of international migration intensifies the factors that give way to gossip. When a group feels threatened, people in the group gossip more, possibly as a way to clarify which behaviors are appropriate (by speaking negatively about those that are not) and reassert group

identity (Wert and Salovey, 2004). Migrants that travel from Jacaltenango to Jupiter find their identity threatened daily, living in a society in which their minority status is salient and makes them a target for discrimination. The migrant experience is fraught with the sort of uncertainties, threats, and challenges that may increase alternative forms of communication such as transnational gossip in both sending and receiving communities. Furthermore, these ambiguities and the concerns they generate are projected onto video, voice, and photo images that pass across borders and connect communities. Thus, ostensibly “neutral” forms of social remittances (such as videos or photos of a *fiesta* or other events) can be interpreted through the lens of transnational gossip.

We begin with a discussion of the current debate on the effects of migration on the lives of women in migrant-sending communities. Next we contextualize our contribution to this debate by introducing our case study of the migrant-sending community of Jacaltenango (in Huehuetenango, Guatemala) and the migrant-receiving community of Jupiter (in Florida). Using the interviews we conducted in Jacaltenango, we present the effects of transnational gossip on the lives of the women whose husbands have migrated, including health issues, isolation, withdrawal from community involvement, and the difficulties negotiating evaluative images of female-headed households. Finally, we include a discussion of the factors present in the migrant context that increase the likelihood of gossip. We conclude by identifying several areas for future research on the topic of transnational gossip.

Studying Migration and Gender Relations: Current Debates

In the past, immigration has been perceived and studied as a male phenomenon and the study of the economic implications of immigration has often overshadowed the study of its human impacts. Gender, however, has slowly become a central topic of immigration studies, thanks largely to the work of ethnographers. Different studies have generated opposing views on the effects of migration and remittances on gender roles. On the one hand,

many researchers have pointed out that migration and remittances have increased female decision-making and power within the household (Lawson, 1998; Gammage, 2003; Suárez and Zapata, 2003; Salazar, 2003). On the other hand, some recent studies have shown that migration increases women's dependence and subordination (Forbes, 2003; Ramírez, García, and Míguez, 2005). The researchers that support the more positive view argue that the absence of men alters women's sense of power within the household (Lawson, 1998:46). Similarly, other studies have found that through the reception of remittances women gain physical control of the money to purchase goods as well as investment capital (Suárez and Zapata, 2003).

Some researchers claim that the extended absence of men increases the empowerment of women because men are not physically present for the day to day decision making. Victoria Lawson (1998:46) explains that when men are absent, women secure more room to be in control of the household and identify themselves as a *mujer fuerte* (strong woman). Additionally, monetary remittances play a key role in the improvement of women's economic circumstances; which in turn may enable women to move more freely in society and possibly to be more respected in their communities. Sarah Gammage (2003:12) presents the case of sending communities in El Salvador and concludes that households with migrants abroad are more likely to be female-headed. Gammage (2003:8) explains that "it may be that the welfare of households with migrants abroad is better not just because of access to remittance income but also because migration has changed preferences and decision-making authority in the household".

In addition to monetary remittances, migration creates a flow of social remittances (Ramírez, García, and Míguez, 2005:11; Levitt, 1998:927). As Peggy Levitt (1998:927) explains, social remittances are ideas, thoughts, feelings, and values that migrants learn abroad and bring back into their original community. Social remittances are communicated when immigrants visit their home communities, or contact them over the phone, or through letters or videos, etc. Concepts of gender equality or educational

practices are views that immigrants might transmit to their communities and such views can influence gender relations and may deconstruct preconceived notions of gender. For example, in the United States education is equally accessible and compulsory for boys and girls while in some Guatemalan towns it is not uncommon for boys to be educationally favored over girls. Social remittances come into play when migrants become used to these everyday realities of gender in the United States and their new attitudes and opinions are transmitted via communication with their home communities. As Peggy Levitt (1998:933) argues, notions of gender identity are revised with migration, and migrants often modify their ideas about women's roles and transmit new ideas back to their communities of origin.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, other studies conclude that migration does not positively alter women's roles in the sending communities and in fact, the separation of families sometimes increases women's subordination to men (Rosas, 2008). For example, Carlota Ramírez, Mar García, and Julia Míguez (2005:33) argue that,

Given that women are largely excluded from formal economic processes, and when they do participate in formal economic processes, they do so in traditionally feminized sectors ... it is very probable that productive investments financed through remittances benefit to a large degree the men in the household.

According to these authors, women are often excluded from work opportunities and networks of information and therefore are unlikely to be able to enjoy the degree of independence implied in some studies. Ramírez, García, and Míguez (2005:16) also argue that remittances cause dependence and discourage the search for other income-generating activities.

Following the recent call for further research into the highly debated area of migration and spousal relations (Peña, 1991; Abdulrahim, 1993; Hirsch, 2003; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Mahler, 2001), we conducted interviews with twelve women whose spouses

had migrated to Jupiter from Jacaltenango. While our interviews were designed to explore numerous topics related to gender, power and spousal relations, we quickly found that transnational gossip was among the most influential, frequently-cited negative aspects of the migration experience. Gossip was an important type of international communication that deeply affected the women in Jacaltenango and restricted their behavior.

Our own interviews confirm the key role gossip plays in the lives of women in migrant-sending communities. Our findings lean toward the more pessimistic interpretation of the impact of migration on gender relations, with gossip as a causal mechanism. Most of the Jacalteco women with whom we spoke did not frame the migration of their spouses in terms of autonomy versus subordination, empowerment versus domination, or in general terms of monetary control and household decision-making. Rather, their interviews reflected a general sense of the fundamental ambiguity of the effects of transnational migration on their lives. The primary negative terms in which women expressed this ambiguity had to do with physical and mental health symptoms precipitated by distance from their spouse and the impact of transnational gossip. In order to evaluate these findings, we have to understand the context in which the interviews took place.

Contextualizing the Study: Gender Relations in Jacaltenango

The primary data for this study was collected in individual and group qualitative interviews conducted in Jacaltenango in June 2006 and in earlier interviews conducted in Jupiter. Although it is clear that each interviewee is unique and should not be used as the basis for strict generalizations, the qualitative interviews yielded various useful insights that have been overlooked in larger quantitative and even qualitative studies of migration and gender.

Jacaltenango is located in Huehuetenango, in the northwest highlands of Guatemala. The main economic activity in Jacaltenango is agriculture. In 1994, the Central American Foundation for Development—Fundación Centroamericana de Desarrollo

(Funcede)—reported that 99 percent of the population were indigenous. 86 percent of the households reported that they did not have electricity, 53 percent reported that they did not have latrines. The predominant household was a traditional ranch built out of adobe, sometimes wood, dirt floors, with little or no internal divisions. Many Jacaltecs live below the poverty line of less than one US dollar per day (Funcede, 1994).

Since the early 1990s, Jacaltenango's infrastructure has been steadily improving: concrete roads and block houses are under construction throughout the town and the influx of remittances is stimulating the local economy. There has also been an expansion of the market of goods and services for sale, including Internet cafés and remittances offices to cater to the needs of migrants and their families. Despite these changes, Jacaltenango continues to be an agricultural-based, rural and indigenous territory typical of many of the highland communities of Guatemala.

Guatemalan society in general, including Maya sectors, tends to be highly patriarchal (Garrard-Burnett, 2000:7). Colonial legacies of social structure and gender relations are still visible in Guatemala. As many historians have recorded, in colonial Guatemala and Latin America, men headed their families and were in control of finances (Bradford and Charlip, 2002:51). Maya perceptions of gender relations are a combination of Maya traditions and Maya interaction with Spaniards during and after the colonial period (La Farge and Byers, 1997).

Migration has long been a part of the life of the Maya in Huehuetenango (Camus, 2007). However, the kind of transnational migration that the highland Maya engage in today is fundamentally different from that which took them to Guatemala's coastal regions for over the past century. The primary difference is that entire families used to migrate together, whereas now it is mostly young men traveling alone (Piedrasanta, 2007:95). In the past, the Maya traveled from the Guatemalan highlands to the coast to work seasonally picking coffee (Piedrasanta, 2007:95-96). This kind of migration to the south was temporary, lasting only for the duration of the coffee-picking season. Today, migration is still

prevalent in Jacaltenango, but most migrants travel north to the United States instead of seasonally, and most Jacaltecos migrate to work in the service industry while only a small percentage work in agriculture, as was the case when migration was primarily internal. Migration patterns changed due to many factors, including the internal conflict in Guatemala, new destinations and networks forged by communities in exile, and growing demand in construction, landscaping and other service-industry jobs in the U.S. Since the early 1990s, Jacaltenango has experienced a large out-flow of young men, and consequentially, many wives, mothers and sisters have become the *de facto* heads of their households. Jupiter, Florida is among a handful of Jacaltec enclave communities in the U.S.

The same network that connects Jupiter, Florida to Jacaltenango is the network that facilitates the transfer of gossip between the two towns. The city of Jupiter is a popular destination for many Jacaltecos. Jupiter is a city of approximately 50 000 located on the east coast of south Florida. There are approximately 4 000 Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants living in Jupiter, of which an estimated 1 000 are from Jacaltenango (Steigenga, Palma, and Girón, 2008). In 2005, Jupiter and Jacaltenango signed a “sister-cities” agreement that promotes educational and cultural exchange between both cities. Additionally, Jacaltec immigrants maintain close relationships with their families and communities in Guatemala, which increases the transnational connection between both cities. Jacaltecos in Jupiter are in constant communication with their town; most have cell phones and also use mail, e-mail, videos and audio cassettes to communicate with their relatives and friends. There is also a radio station that is aired on AM waves in both Jupiter and Jacaltenango that allows both communities of Jacaltecos to be up to date with events in both cities.

Due largely to the bond between Jupiter and Jacaltenango, the men in Jupiter are well-informed of the daily activities of their wives. As Ana Lucía Torres (2008:147) found in her study of migrant wives in a Mexican community, gossip travels easily through established migrant transnational networks. Like the women in

the Mexican community Torres (2008) studied, women in Jacaltenango live in fear of their husbands' hearing gossip about their poor behavior, infidelity or problems with the children (see also Rosas, 2008:168-170). The interviews we had previously conducted with the Jacaltecs of Jupiter corroborate these fears. In an earlier set of interviews of Guatemalan migrants living in Jupiter, we discovered that men often feel unsure of how women will spend their money. Our male respondents explained that many women think it is easy to make money in the U.S. so they take the money for granted. A frequent assumption among those interviewed was that "the women will throw lavish parties and invite everyone they know, just for reasons of prestige" (Canache, 2003:50). Male immigrants also reported "discipline problems with children whose homes lack male authority figures, spouses who misuse remittances, and increases in alcohol abuse among women and children" (Steigenga, Palma, and Girón, 2008:27). Women in Jacaltenango are keenly aware of these perceptions, and do everything possible to lead a life that leaves no doubt in everyone else's minds that they are being responsible and loyal.

The Voices of Jacaltec Women: Insights from the Interviews

The transfer of transnational gossip is rapid and moves both ways. As Laura, one of our respondents described: "My husband tells me that he finds out about anything that happens here [in Jacaltenango] within hours, and it is the same for me. If something is going on in Jupiter I find out straight away" (Laura, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

All of our interviewees were very attuned and aware of transnational gossip and what it meant in their daily lives. The social pressures imposed by seemingly innocent conversations play a central role in how women's lives change with their spouse's migration. Carmen explains this process:

Women whose husbands are in the U.S. are constantly being watched by others. Everybody likes talking about you, about how unfaithful

and spendthrift you are. About how you always misspend the hard earned money your husband sends you from abroad and about how you don't appreciate their hard work. As soon as you leave your house people are looking at you, noticing every step you take. However, they do not notice that you are building a house and raising a child; instead they always say you are misspending money (Carmen, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

As Carmen notes, neighbors and family friends are constantly keeping an eye on the *de facto* single mother. The community in Jacaltenango fit the pattern described by Rosas (2008), as they are quick to talk about women whose spouses are living abroad.

A study by Kavita Datta and Cathy McIlwaine (2000) found that women who head households in Guatemala remain subject to societal disapproval and marginalization. Datta and McIlwaine (2000:44) suggest that disapproval of women-headed households in Guatemala is often associated with the notion that it is harmful to children. In their study, many Guatemalans suggested that "when single mothers had to go out to work, children were left behind to fend for themselves, often turning to delinquency, drug use, and / or gang activity". This purported "inability" of women to bring up their children adds to the social stigma associated with female headed households. Although the women we interviewed are not "single", they are still subject to this type of disapproval because their husbands are absent.

Given the degree of patriarchy prevalent in Jacaltenango, gendered expectations for women's behavior and general distrust of female-headed households in the field location we studied, it should come as little surprise that transnational gossip is likely to interact with such a context in a manner that severely circumscribes the activities and participation of women in the public sphere. Because women are dependent on the remittances that are being sent by their migrant husbands, gossip about sexual promiscuity that can ruin their marriage also poses a threat to their survival because it may cause their husbands to stop the flow of remittances as a response. One of our respondents explains this

anxiety and the impact it has on her social participation: “I do not participate in the community. When men leave one is always afraid of gossip. Because when they [our husbands] are far away, people start telling them things about what you are or are not doing. I am so afraid that my husband will hear a rumor” (Lupe, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

María, one of our respondents explained her similar response to the gossiping: “I don’t go out, when my children are at school I stay at home doing chores, and when they come home I just take care of their needs. I do not really go out other than for a walk that my doctor prescribed” (María, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Like María, other women also explained that for the most part they stayed at home and avoided attending parties, meetings or community events.

The widespread aversion to parties and events we found among our respondents has complex causes. Many forms of transnational communication that may appear neutral on the surface hold hidden dangers for participants. Images of loved ones are powerful and easily taken out of context and distorted. Anita, a mother of two whose husband has been away for five years explains:

There is a problem here, when there is a party or festival the first thing people do is film it. They film it and later send the video to our husbands in Jupiter. This sometimes creates conflicts, say sometimes you are just dancing and they start saying things that are not true just because you were dancing. So I am a little bit afraid of that. I am not doing anything wrong, but people always comment on everything so you have to always be careful (Anita, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Anita describes a situation where participating in a local festival (normally a ritual that relieves stress and bonds families) becomes potential fodder for transnational gossip. It is not the video itself that is to be feared, but the power of the video if it is seen out of context, with limited information, and in a situation of uncertainty. Considering that in couples with a migrant spouse there are large periods that elapse between direct personal encounters,

these gaps are left blank and may be filled with thoughts of infidelity. Jealousy and insecurity may provide a sort of filter through which video images are seen, and innocent activities may become serious relationship problems. Thus, Anita (along with most of our respondents) chooses to limit her participation and alter her behavior in a way that will leave no room for speculation. Because she cannot control the gossip or the way her behavior will be interpreted from a video recording, she alters that which she can control: her own participation in local events and celebrations.

Sometimes these worries are so great that women also avoid participating in the workforce. Carmen had been working for several years, and after her husband left, rumors and gossip caused her to leave her job. Carmen describes her personal experience:

My husband told me that some of his best friends said I was being unfaithful. Due to the type of job I had I mostly worked with men. We would get together at five in the morning, travel to different places and spend the whole day working together. Simply because people saw me leave and come back with different men, people started saying I was being unfaithful to my husband. This created a lot of tensions in our relationship (Carmen, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Carmen decided that the best thing for her relationship and her family was to leave her job and dedicate her full attention to her house and child.

Carmen's experience raises the larger question of the impact of migration on female participation in the community and in the work force: Do women resort to work for income? Are they participating in the community? Is the population's gender imbalance changing the socio-political arena? The women we interviewed shared similar views and experiences on the majority of these questions, and transnational gossip again played a significant role in their experiences.

As Maria Aysa and Douglas Massey (2004) explain, women usually work in the period immediately after their spouse has migrated until they have paid off the debt incurred in their travels.

Among our respondents who reported they still had debts, they all either had or were looking for work in order to cover daily expenses. One of the women described the various jobs she had worked after her husband left: “I work now, I go out to clean houses and do laundry. I sometimes sell fruit too, but now selling fruit is not enough, so I also go out to work in different houses here in Jacaltenango” (Mónica, Jacaltenango, June 2006). Some women work after their husbands leave because very little money is left after paying off debts. The women also noted that it was important to them to have a job because they did not want to depend solely on the migrant’s income.

Although having the additional job/s is very important to the women we interviewed, they also explained how difficult it was to find one. When asked what job she currently had, Carmen explained:

Finding a job as an indigenous woman and mother is hard; having your husband abroad makes finding a job and keeping one even harder. In my case, it is particularly hard to find a job because I am here without my husband and everybody is always criticizing what I do, and as result of so much social disapproval, I end up being rejected ... it is harder to get hired (Carmen, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

As we noted earlier, there is a general understanding that the Jacalteco mother should be taking care of her children, and therefore should not be working outside the home. In fact, our respondent’s numerous responsibilities at home made it harder for them to have the time to look for work. Two of the women we interviewed stopped working when their husbands migrated. They explained that soon after they stopped working they realized they needed the extra money and started looking for jobs, but had not been successful. One of them explained that she was now too busy around the house to go back to work.

Our interviews also included questions about women’s participation in their local and extended communities both before and after the family member migrated. The questions sought

to answer whether the socio-political arena in rural Guatemalan towns was being reconstituted with the emigration of so many men. Generally, we found that women did tend to be more active in the community when their husbands left. The extent of their participation, however, was limited to religious groups and church meetings. For example, Anita explains that from the time her husband left she has been participating in church groups:

I have been involved in the *Consejo Pastoral* ever since my husband left ... Sometimes I don't have anything else to do at home, so I like going there because I can listen to God's words. I tell my husband about my experiences there, and he tells me that it is a good thing to go to church. That is how I am involved in my community (Anita, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

The women we interviewed felt that the religious groups helped them because they felt more in touch with God and their spirituality. They also expressed that they felt the need to pray for their husbands' wellbeing as well as thank God for everything they have achieved so far, and the church provided them with a channel to do so.

While our respondents reported an increase in their religious participation once their spouses had left, most reported that their communal participation *outside* of religious networks had diminished. Anita explained that after her husband left she partook in fewer community proceedings and activities: "I participate less now that he is gone ... before we would find out about things through his friends and co-workers. But now I rarely find out what is going on. Like yesterday's talk [on immigrants in the U.S.], I only found out about it after it had already started. I like to participate, but I rarely do" (Anita, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

In sum, we found that women in Jacaltenango whose husbands have migrated to the United States feel pressured to alter their behavior; participating less in community activities and avoiding situations or events that might lend themselves to transnational gossip. Because of the stigma and the fear of gossip, women see

their job prospects and social capital diminished. At the same time, however, our respondents suggested that participation in religious networks increases when their husbands migrate. We return to these findings in the discussion and conclusion.

Transnational Gossip, Isolation and Health

Constant seclusion to avoid gossip combined with the effects of distance from their loved ones often results in health problems for the wives of migrants. Several interviewees mentioned having health problems ever since their husbands migrated. Women said that their psychological ailments, such as depression, anxiety and sadness often led to physical illnesses. María, a sister and wife to migrants that live in Jupiter, describes her health ever since her husband left:

He has been over there [in the United States] for a while now, I am already sick ... I'm sick because of my loneliness ... There are things I would like to tell my husband, but it's not the same if we are far away. It's hard ... It hurts so much because of my kids. It's so difficult. He is so loving, I miss him ... It's not easy. You can see my sadness on my face; my skin started getting stained a little after he left. Loneliness has affected me a lot, that is why I am not okay, and parts of my face are now discolored (María, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Nearly all of the women we interviewed in Jacaltenango are seeing doctors who often prescribe medication and sometimes recommended daily thirty-minute walks. Our interviews with local pharmacists revealed that many women with migrant spouses or migrant family members have been buying medicine (for high blood pressure and anti-depressants) to help their anxieties brought about by gossip, fear of gossip and the isolation that accompanies it.

When asked about their health, most women replied that they had been ill and lonely. Not only do they feel lonely because their

partners are distant, but also because often their families and community reject them and criticize them. María explains that her father-in-law is very demanding and despite the fact that they have built a concrete block-house and all four of her children are attending school, he is constantly saying bad things about her. María claims his pressures and disapproval contribute to her poor health.

María's situation gives us a key insight into who is doing the gossiping. Although we did not ask respondents to specifically identify the sources of gossip, a number of potential sources emerged in our interviews. First, as in María's case, the family of the migrant may have reason to utilize the threat of gossip to control the behavior of their son's spouse. As one of our respondents said "... sometimes the husband's family rejects you. I don't know what the reason is, but there is a lot of rejection coming from the husband's family". The family of a migrant man has an interest in controlling the way in which the wife spends remittance money (Rosas, 2008:169). The rejection that María talks about may be a product of jealousy or unhappiness with having to share remittance money with a spouse. The migrant's family may assert their power by limiting the wife's behavior and spending.

Second, asymmetries of wealth between families with and without migrants may lead to jealousy and bitterness. As one of our respondents explains: "... sometimes [people talk] out of jealousy because they're sending you money and you have a block house and other things to get ahead". Studies of sending communities in Guatemala suggest that families who send migrants tend to have much better houses than families who do not send migrants (Dardón and Velásquez, 2002:17). Many more migrant households are made of concrete block, while homes without migrants are more often made of wood or adobe. Also, there is evidence that if remittances have been received for at least six months, it increases the likelihood that the house will have three or more rooms (Dardón and Velásquez, 2002:17). Migrant sending houses also have a much higher percentage of services and utilities, such as water, electricity and phone (Palma, Velásquez, and Gutiérrez,

2002:22). It may be the case that families without migrants pass along potentially juicy gossip in order to compensate for these disparities.

Third, we discovered that men who have not migrated also participate in the gossip, sometimes telling their migrant friends that their wives are unfaithful. Young men who have not migrated might sometimes also lie about their own sexual experiences with the wives of migrants, generating gossip to elevate their own status (Rosas, 2008:168). One of our respondents identified her husband's best friend as the carrier of gossip. She explains her own experience as a victim of gossip: "when my husband returned to visit, one of his best friends told him I had been unfaithful to him". Men who have stayed behind may be gossiping in order to voice their powerlessness. As one of the women explained: "the men leave because the situation is so tough here ... jobs are hard to find ... and things are very expensive". As Wert and Salovey (2004) explain, when people feel disenfranchised and powerless they may engage in gossip as a backdoor way to reassert power over the situation. The men who have not migrated face a very difficult labor market with little power to change their economic situation, so they are a prime constituency for gossip.

Finally, the wives of migrants themselves engage in gossip. In the course of our interviews several respondents engaged in evaluative talk about other women whom they said misspent money and raised their children improperly. Mónica noted:

Many mothers, because they have enough money, tell their children, "here is some money, go play in the arcade". Or maybe their child will tell them, "I want a motorcycle" or their young sons will say, "I want a car and this and that", and these mothers immediately give it to them, they give their children too much freedom. Young people are joining gangs and they are very affected by their father's absence (Mónica, Jacaltenango, June 2006).

Although she did not name any one woman in particular, this respondent was gossiping in general about the "stereotypical"

misspending wife of a migrant. By engaging in this kind of gossip women may achieve one of the goals of gossip that Wert and Salovey (2004) suggest: reinforcing the acceptability of their behavior and increasing their status in comparison with these unnamed “bad” women. Women such as our respondent are calibrating the “moral compass” of Jacaltec society by gossiping about other women who behave in unacceptable ways. Women themselves reinforce the boundaries of what “good behavior” is, and reinforce the dichotomy in which frugality and sexual restraint are “good” qualities in a wife and mother. By talking about the ways in which *other women* raise their children improperly and misuse money, women simultaneously reinforce the “bad mother, bad wife” stereotype and distance themselves from it.

*Discussion: The Amplification of Gossip
in the Transnational Social Field*

Research on gossip suggests that it is frequently utilized as a tool to regulate actions and values. Gossiping provides participants with clues as to what behaviors are acceptable in their communities and what behaviors are frowned upon. Gossip provides both confirmation and reinforcement for the “collective moral compass” within a particular context (Wert and Salovey, 2004). Gossip allows both subjects and objects to “identify visible irregularities and authorizes the sanctioning of behavior outside the established societal norms” (Chávez-Arellano, Vázquez, and De la Rosa, 2006:1).

In a study of gossip at a Mexican university, Chávez-Arellano, Vázquez, and De la Rosa (2006) found that characteristics such as “sexual restraint” and “femininity” were desirable behavior in women, whereas “sexual freedom” and “aggressiveness” were desirable male characteristics. In order to avoid being gossiped about, women changed their behavior to conform to perceived standards of appropriate female behavior (Chávez-Arellano, Vázquez, and De la Rosa, 2006:7). These kinds of change in behavior severely

limited the social interactions of women at the university. In other words, women would either change their behavior or distance themselves from a social group as a consequence of gossip.

Joanna Dreby (2009) studied the effects of gossip on transnational Mexican families, finding that gossip is a double-edged sword; although it encourages individuals to maintain their family relations it also evaluates men and women differently. Dreby found that gossip about women carried a greater stigma because their alleged transgressions were of a moral nature, challenging the traditional role of women as caretakers. Gossip about men was only serious when the transgression threatened the man's traditional role as the financial provider; as long as the man continued to fulfill his role as provider the negative effects of gossip were less damaging for men than for women (Dreby, 2009). Dreby's study focused on the effect of gossip on the family unit, but did not explicitly address the impact of gossip on the women who remain in the migrant-sending community.

Studies of Mexican migrant sending communities also provide key insights into the role of gossip. Carolina Rosas (2008) posits that "control over women" is one of the "mandates of masculinity" that men must redefine in the context of migration, and the faithfulness of one's wife is central to this control. Men, Rosas (2008:171) explains, often have relatives and community members who can act as "watchmen" in their absence to ensure the loyalty of their wives.

Our research substantiates these findings about the gendered nature of gossip and extends them to the context of transnational migration. We found that Jacalteco women tend to lose connections in social networks and also self-regulate their behavior when their spouses migrate. Particularly, we found that transnational gossip serves as a type of social control that the Jacalteco transnational community imposes on the wives of migrants. These women choose not to participate in community activities for fear of gossip reaching their distant husbands, who may in turn hold back on remittances as a form of punishment. Transnational gossip also

limits employment possibilities; people may gossip about women if they do get a job because they are leaving their children unattended, or are seen with male co-workers.

While married male migrants are also impacted by gossip in the context of Jupiter, they are not subject to the same kinds of community controls and pressures that women face in Jacaltenango (Palma, Girón and Steigenga, 2007). The Jacalteco community in Jupiter is more dispersed and less cohesive than the community in Jacaltenango. Migrant men in the United States have greater possibilities for anonymity should they engage in any gossip-worthy activities (Dreby, 2009). The wives of migrants who remain in Jacaltenango, however, are subject to close scrutiny by their community.

Simply put, transnational communication, and especially transnational gossip is a gendered activity. Women and men have differential access to resources and power and are differently affected by gossip. Women who are recipients of remittances are “in a dependent relationship to remitters” (Mahler, 2001:601). This author argues that while non-migrant wives may indeed “imagine sexual infidelity by their migrant husbands” they lack options and either “acquiesce or chase after their husbands, risking life and limb in the process”. On the other hand, “if men discover infidelity, they can take revenge by withholding remittances, among other strategies” (Mahler, 2001:585).

While male migrants may be less impacted as the subjects of gossip, there certainly is reason to believe that they are likely to be particularly receptive to gossip about their spouses at home. Wert and Salovey (2004) assert that those who are disenfranchised from formal modes of influence and communication (those who do not have a say in many of the decisions and external factors that affect their lives) may need a “back road” and gossiping may provide such a road. This “generic” description of those who are likely to participate in and be influenced by gossip could hardly be more descriptive of the plight of the largely unauthorized population of Jacalteco immigrant men in Jupiter.

In a context of high ambiguity and disenfranchisement, Forbes (2003) argues that the motivational structure for men to seek sources of control over their spouses is frequently amplified. As she explains:

Immigrant men often feel neglected and disappointed, which sometimes brings out patriarchal habits and efforts to re-establish traditional roles—even by force if necessary. In a situation where men are unsure of themselves, they often become skeptical about their wives. Their own feelings of inferiority can lead to their doubting the love and trustworthiness of their wives. When men mistrust their wives, they may restrict them and try to control them in an effort to boost their egos (Forbes, 2003:29).

Thus, the context of transnational migration is one that generates and amplifies the role of gossip. If the receiving community is characterized by uncertainty and daily threats, life in the sending community is characterized by even greater uncertainty and inability to influence events. In Jacaltenango, the wives of migrants are dependent on inconsistent remittances, generating a constant a sense of uncertainty. Remittances are not consistent because in Jupiter many migrants find work only sporadically; this lack of work stability is added to the daily uncertainty that many face because of their legal status and other challenges in the United States. The cautionary tales of “the woman” whose spouse abandoned her for another woman, could not find work, drank away his remittances, or simply dropped out of contact are daily fare in the transnational social field that links Jupiter and Jacaltenango. The women we interviewed in Jacaltenango lived with these fears daily and went to great lengths to ensure they would not suffer a similar fate.

Towards an Agenda for Further Research on Transnational Gossip

The findings of this study shed light on how communication plays an important role in shaping the way migration affects

gender relations. While migration certainly has the potential for introducing positive changes in gender relations, our case study suggests that in transnational communities, gossip may become a factor that thwarts those changes and reinforces patriarchal relations. Future studies in this area should take into account the ways that local gender dynamics, education levels, and religious participation may change the way in which transnational gossip affects women. Jacaltenango is a mostly rural, indigenous setting with a strong patriarchal culture. It may be the case that the effects of gossip would play out differently in a comparative study with contrasting demographics and gender dynamics.

The role of religious institutions is also a key area for future research. In our study, it was clear that religious institutions are considered the “appropriate” forum for female participation in Jacaltenango’s patriarchal social system. It should come as little surprise that gossip might be utilized to direct women’s participation to an environment where messages of frugality, fidelity, and other virtues are likely to be reinforced. This is a rich area for further research, as findings from a study among migrants in the receiving community of Jupiter have found that religious organizations play a similar role for young immigrant men who lack the normal societal pressures they would experience were they within their home communities (Palma, Girón and Steigenga, 2007). Future studies should include specific measures of religious participation in both sending and receiving communities.

Further research could also probe deeper into the origins and process of transnational gossip. In this limited study we found that many women were in fact actively engaging in gossip, perhaps to portray themselves as morally superior in comparison with the stereotype of the wasteful, inattentive mother who is the subject of their gossip. Are men simply recipients of transnational gossip and are their reactions to it compounded by a feeling of disenfranchisement brought about by the migrant experience? How and when do men engage in or become victims of transnational gossip? Who is doing the gossiping and for what strategic purposes?

Although this is only a preliminary study based upon a limited number of qualitative interviews, our findings can be broadened and developed with survey research measuring overall health and mental stability, comparing families that send migrants with families who do not send migrants using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Donato *et al.*, 2006; Mahler and Pessar, 2006). Further studies of migration and gender should take into account not only the state of gender relations for couples prior to migration, but also the role that transnational gossip plays in restricting women's abilities to participate in society after their husbands have migrated.

Finally, the mental and physical health problems our respondents unanimously attributed to the impact of migration and transnational gossip also warrant a more significant location within the debate about the effects of migration on gender relations in communities of origin. While the experiences of our respondents were overwhelmingly negative, the negative impacts were attributed to a combination of contextual factors, societal pressures (gossip), personal choices, and the difficulties associated with living apart from their spouses for long periods of time. Only when we dropped our preconceived formulas for measuring autonomy and subordination and listened more carefully to the voices of the women we interviewed did this complexity and fundamental ambiguity come to light.

References

- Abdulrahim, Dima, 1993, "Defining Gender in a Second Exile: Palestinian Women in West Berlin", in Gina Buijs, ed., *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*, Oxford, United Kingdom, Berg Publishers, pp. 55-82.
- Aysa, Maria and Douglas Massey, 2004, "Wives Left Behind: The Labor Market Behavior of Women in Migrant Communities", in Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, eds., *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation Publications, pp. 131-146.

- Bradford Burns, E., and Julie A. Charlip, 2002, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*, 7th edition, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Camus, Manuela, 2007, ed., *Comunidades en movimiento: La migración internacional en el norte de Huehuetenango*, Antigua Guatemala, Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo/Centro de Estudios y Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala.
- Canache, Anya [honors thesis], 2003, "The Maya in Jupiter, Florida: Remittances and Immigrant Perceptions of Change in the Home Community", Jupiter, United States of America, Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College-Florida Atlantic University.
- Carter, Marion W., 2004, "Gender and Community Context: An Analysis of Husbands' Households Authority in Rural Guatemala", *Sociology Forum*, vol. 19, num. 4, pp. 633-652.
- Chávez-Arellano, María Eugenia, Verónica Vázquez García, and Aurelia de la Rosa Regalado, 2006, "El chisme y las representaciones sociales de género y sexualidad: Un estudio entre estudiantes adolescentes de la Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, México", *Gaceta de Antropología*, num. 22, pp. 22-31.
- Dardón Sosa, Juan Jacobo, and Juan Luis Velásquez Carrera, 2002, *Encuesta de hogar de la migración en Guatemala en la aldea Duraznales, Concepción Chiquirichapa, Quetzaltenango*, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, Programa de Migración-Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 44 pp.
- Datta, Kavitta, and Cathy McIlwaine, 2000, "Empowered Leaders? Perspectives on Women Heading Households in Latin America and Southern Africa", *Gender and Development*, vol. 8, num. 3, pp. 40-49.
- Donato, Katharine M., et al., 2006, "A Glass Half Full? Gender in Migration Studies", *International Migration Review*, vol. 40, num. 1, pp. 3-26.
- Dreby, Joanna, 2009, "Gender and Transnational Gossip", *Qualitative Sociology*, num. 32, pp. 33-52.
- Fundación Centroamericana de Desarrollo (Funcede), 1994, *Diagnóstico y plan de desarrollo del municipio de Jacaltenango*, Departamento de Huehuetenango, Guatemala, Funcede.

- Gammage, Sarah [paper], 2003, "Migration and Poverty in El Salvador: Shifting Gender Roles and Investment Strategies", in Primer Coloquio Internacional: "Migración y Desarrollo: Transnacionalismo y Nuevas Perspectivas de Integración", Zacatecas, Mexico, October 23-25.
- Garrard-Burnett, Virginia, 2000, *Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues in Post Conflict Guatemala*, Washington, DC, Center for Development Information and Evaluation-U.S. Agency for International Development, September (Working Paper, num. 311).
- Hirsch, J., 2003, *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, 2003, "Gender and Immigration: A Retrospective and Introduction", in Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed., *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*, Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 3-19.
- La Farge, Oliver, and Douglas Byers, 1997, *El pueblo del cargador del año*, Antigua Guatemala, Fundación Yax Te'/Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies/Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica.
- Lang, Graeme, and Josephine Smart, 2002, "Migration and the 'Second Wife' in South China", *International Migration Review*, vol. 36, num. 2, pp. 546-569.
- Lawson, Victoria A., 1998, "Hierarchical Households and Gendered Migration in Latin America: Feminist Extensions to Migration Research", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 22, num. 1, pp. 39-53.
- Levitt, Peggy, 1998, "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion", *International Migration Review*, vol. 32, num. 4, pp. 926-948.
- Mahler, Sarah J., 2001, "Transnational Relationships: The Struggle to Communicate Across Borders", *Identities*, vol. 7, num. 4, pp. 583-619.
- Mahler, Sarah J., and Patricia R. Pessar, 2006, "Gender Matters: Ethnographers Bring Gender from the Periphery toward the

- Core of Migration Studies”, *International Migration Review*, vol. 40, num. 1, pp. 27-63.
- Martin, Susan Forbes, 2003, *Women and Migration*, in Consultative Meeting on “Migration and Mobility and how this Movement Affects Women”, Malmö, Sweden, Division for the Advancement of Women-United Nations, December 2-4 (CM/MMW/2003/WP.1).
- Palma, Silvia Irene; Carol Girón Solórzano, and Timothy Steingenga, 2007, “Nuevas comunidades en los Estados Unidos: De Jacaltenango a Júpiter: Negociando el concepto de familia en el espacio transnacional y el tiempo”, in Manuela Camus, ed., *Comunidades en movimiento: La migración internacional en el norte de Huehuetenango*, Antigua Guatemala, Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo/Centro de Estudios y Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala, pp. 171-204.
- Palma, Silvia Irene; Juan Luis Velásquez, and Miguel Gutiérrez, 2002, *Impacto económico y social de la migración internacional en Guatemala*, Ciudad de Guatemala, Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo/Organización Internacional de Migraciones/Fondo de Población de Naciones Unidas (Cuadernos de Desarrollo Humano, num. 2002-4).
- Peña, Manuel, 1991, “Class, Gender and *Machismo*: The ‘Treachorous Woman’ Folklore of Mexican Male Workers”, *Gender & Society*, vol. 5, num. 1, pp. 30-46.
- Piedrasanta Herrera, Ruth, 2007, “Apuntes sobre transmigración y remesas entre los chuj de Huehuetenango”, in Manuela Camus, ed., *Comunidades en movimiento: La migración internacional en el norte de Huehuetenango*, Antigua Guatemala, Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo/Centro de Estudios y Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala, pp. 95-112.
- Ramírez, Carlota; Mar García Domínguez, and Julia Míguez Morais, 2005, *Crossing Borders: Remittances, Gender and Development*, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, Internation-

- al Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women-United Nations.
- Rosas, Carolina, 2008, *Varones al son de la migración: Migración internacional y masculinidades de Veracruz a Chicago*, Mexico, D.F., Centro de Estudios Demográficos, Urbanos y Ambientales-El Colegio de México.
- Salazar, Ana, 2003, "Mazahuas: La migración deja 886 pueblos de mujeres en 44 municipios del estado de México", *Triple Jornada*, Mexico, D.F., num. 54, February 3. Available at <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/02/03/entrada54.htm>> (last accessed on October 4, 2011).
- Silvey, Rachel, 2006, "Geographies of Gender and Migration: Spatializing Social Difference", *International Migration Review*, vol. 40, num. 1, pp. 64-81.
- Sinke, Suzanne M., 2006, "Gender and Migration: Historical Perspectives", *International Migration Review*, vol. 40, num. 1, pp. 82-103.
- Steigenga, Timothy J.; Irene Palma, and Carol Girón, 2008, "El transnacionalismo y la movilización colectiva de la comunidad maya en Júpiter, Florida", *Migraciones Internacionales* 15, vol. 4, num. 4, July-December, pp. 37-71.
- Suárez, Blanca, and Emma Zapata Martelo, 2003, "Desde milagros hasta obras públicas realizan campesinas con remesas de migrantes", *Triple Jornada*, Mexico, D.F., num. 54, February 3. Available at <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/02/03/entrada54.htm>> (last accessed on October 4, 2011).
- Torres Castillo, Ana Lucía [master's thesis], 2008, "Mujeres esposas de migrantes y su participación en los espacios públicos. El caso de la comunidad indígena purépecha de Angahuan, Michoacán", Mexico, Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer-Centro de Estudios Sociológicos-El Colegio de México.
- Vega Briones, Germán, 2002, "La migración mexicana a Estados Unidos desde una perspectiva de género", *Migraciones Internacionales* 2, vol. 1, num. 2, January-June, pp. 179-192.

- Vidal Fernández, Laura *et al.*, 2002, “Redes de apoyo y percepciones de la migración a Estados Unidos de mujeres tabasqueñas despulpadoras de jaiba”, *Migraciones Internacionales* 2, vol. 1, num. 2, January-June, pp. 29-61.
- Wert, Sarah R., and Peter Salovey, 2004, “A Social Comparison Account of Gossip”, *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 8, num. 2, June, pp. 122-137.
- Zhou, Min, 2003, “Contemporary Trends in Immigration to the United States: Gender, Labor Market Incorporation, and Implications for Family Formation”, *Migraciones Internacionales* 5, vol. 2, num. 2, July-December, pp. 77-95.

Date of receipt: May 24, 2010.

Date of acceptance: August 12, 2010.