

# TRACING MIGRANT-MOTHERS' 'RETURN' NARRATIVES IN THE MEXICO-UNITED STATES AND PERU-BELGIUM MIGRATORY-CIRCUITS

## NARRATIVAS DE “RETORNO” DE MADRES MIGRANTES EN LOS CIRCUITOS MIGRATORIOS MÉXICO-ESTADOS UNIDOS Y PERÚ-BÉLGICA

María Vivas-Romero\* y Anabela O. Sánchez Martínez\*\*

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**Resumen:** ¿Qué estrategias emplean las madres migrantes para retornar al país de origen? ¿Cómo influye en la decisión de retornar el acceso a la protección social de sus hijos ciudadanos binacionales? Por medio de esta contribución respondemos a estas preguntas, partiendo desde el análisis comparativo de las carreras migratorias de dos madres en contextos radicalmente diferentes. Argumentamos que la decisión del retorno de estas madres migrantes y las estrategias empleadas para hacerlo dependen del acceso a la protección social que tienen sus hijos binacionales y de sus percepciones subjetivas sobre cómo ser “buenas madres”. Esta comparación transatlántica muestra de qué forma diferentes contextos nacionales, culturas del cuidado y de la maternidad, dan origen a diversos modelos de movilidad internacional para estas mujeres y sus familias.

**Palabras clave:** migración de retorno, protección social, madres migrantes, carreras migratorias, narrativas.

**Abstract:** How do contemporary migrant mothers strategize return to their home countries? How does the social protection available for their bi-national children in sending and destination countries affect their decision to return? Through this contribution, we aimed to tackle these questions. We draw a comparative analysis of two longitudinal migratory careers in radically different contexts. We argue that our participants' return decisions as well as strategies employed in order to return depend on both their bi-national children's effective access to social protection and their subjective perceptions on 'good-motherhood'.

\* Center for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM) Université de Liège, Bélgica.

\*\* Universidad de Monterrey, México.

This transatlantic comparison shows how different national contexts, cultures of care and motherhood result in different patterns of international mobility for these women and their families.

**Keywords:** return migration, social protection, migrant mothers, migratory careers, narratives.

**Résumé :** Quelles stratégies les mères migrantes emploient-elles pour retourner dans leur pays d'origine ? Comment l'accès à la protection sociale de leurs enfants, citoyens binationaux, influe-t-il sur cette décision ? Dans la présente contribution, nous répondons à ces questions en nous basant sur une analyse comparative des carrières migratoires de deux mères à des contextes radicalement différents. Notre argument étant que la décision de retour de ces mères migrantes, ainsi que les stratégies qu'elles mettent en œuvre pour ce faire, sont fonction de l'accès à la protection sociale de leurs enfants binationaux et de l'idée qu'elles se font de ce qu'être une « bonne mère » signifie. Cette comparaison transatlantique dévoile comment différents contextes nationaux, différentes cultures des soins et de la maternité induisent divers modèles de mobilité internationale pour ces femmes et leurs familles.

**Mots-clés :** migration de retour, sécurité sociale, mères migrants, carrières migratoires, narratives.

Irma, a mother of three U.S.-born children and a former undocumented migrant, starts a new life in Atlixco, Mexico, upon her return from New York City. Meanwhile, Amelia, a mother of two Belgian-born children, also starts a life in Lima after returning from Brussels. Their stories mirror distinctive experiences of an increasing number of migrant women worldwide, whose desire to advance in their professional lives or to provide their families with social protection has led them to engage in migratory careers that include international mobility strategies to respond to the social and economic challenges (Zlotnick, 2003). Drawing from Irma and Amelia's life stories, this study explores how different institutional contexts and cultures of care and motherhood as well as distinctive racial, class, gender individual standpoints lead to distinct strategies of return and migrant circularity.

We situate our participants' migratory careers in two international migratory circuits and analyze personal and familial strategies concerning their return. Following contemporary feminist scholars' efforts (Crenshaw, 1991; Brah, 1991; Talpade Mohanty, 2003; Ferree, 2011) we analyze our participants' life stories while depicting how intersectional, fluid and contextual differences of class, race,<sup>1</sup> and gender standpoints affected, although not entirely determined, their heterogeneous migratory careers (Talpade Mohanty, 2003). Indeed, Irma and Amelia as well as their respective families inhabit different migratory circuits (New York-Atlixco and Brussels-Lima), and therefore they embrace different class and racial standpoints and have different migratory statuses (one undocumented, the other documented); however, both are mothers of children with dual nationality. We privilege Irma's case in order to fit the journal's aims, whereas Amelia's case is used as a contrasting experience that shows diverse social mobility for women in contemporary societies.

Our analysis focuses on how international migrant mothers negotiate and strategize return to their home countries. We emphasized the well-being of their children and types of social protection available in sending and receiving countries as key factor in their decision to return, despite differences in class and gender individual motivations. We address these questions using the concept of 'migratory career' (Martiniello and Rea, 2011), while complementing it with an intersectional approach (Ferree, 2011). This approach aptly captures subjective and objective dimensions of return migration. It allows for an analysis of return migration, not as a definitive stage in these women's life stories, but rather as a bifurcation that results from particular junctures in their trajectories as migrant mothers. In our analysis of return as a bifurcation in their migratory careers, this study emphasizes that there is not unequivocal return experience; instead different return experiences emerge from individual biographies, which are in turn influenced

by the individual's standpoints or simply by the circumstances. The origins and relevance of this theoretical approach for the study of women's return migration experiences are discussed in the following section.

### **Towards an Intersectional Migratory Career approach of 'Return' migration**

Our migratory career approach to return migration is based on Martiniello and Rea's (2011) concept of migratory career. The concept was originally framed by Hughes (1937, 1960) as an analytical tool that sought to understand "the sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system made by any individual who works in that system" (Becker, 1963: 24). Hughes developed a model that systematically took into account objective factors, such as structures of opportunity and constraints as well as subjective factors, such as changes in perception, motivation and desires of an individual. Hughes conceptualized a career as a series of statuses with typical sequences of changes in positions achieved continuously.

Through the 1960s an American sociologist Howard Becker (1963) rearticulated the concept to study the often deemed deviant life styles and careers of jazz musicians. Like Hughes, Becker also defined careers as a process of a changing status of positions. However, Becker's definition of the concept surpasses the classic one, defining the professional career a succession of jobs held by an individual. Accordingly, a passage from one career step to another occurs via a learning process through which the actor, on the one hand, learns a specific practice and, on the other, constructs a representation of the activity, granting him or her the preservation of a positive self-image. A career, thus, consists of a simultaneous learning process of a practice and of a change of social identification.

Building on these original conceptualizations, Martiniello and Rea (2011) proposed the concept of 'migratory career' in order to study contemporary international migration strategies as learning experiences during an individual's life course. According to Martiniello and Rea (2011), individuals experience migratory careers as learning paths in which changes and strategies are not always rationally planned. Motivation and success are endowed with a subjective meaning and used by an individual to construct a positive self-image. Migratory careers are continuously influenced, although not entirely determined by macro, meso and micro-level factors, including: 1) structures of opportunity and constraints determined by economic

and migratory policies both in sending and receiving states; 2) social resources, such as transnational family networks, and 3) the migrant's individual motivations and gender roles.

We use the concept of migratory career to examine the experiences of Irma and Amelia returning to their countries of origin as well as the decision-making process surrounding this endeavor to return. We argue that Irma and Amelia's return experience represents a bifurcation in their respective migratory careers. However, differently from Martiniello and Rea (2014), we asked "the other question" (Matsuda, 1991: 1189) and depicted how multiple markers of difference such as gender, race, class, migratory status interact (Ferree, 2011) at different levels and lead to the construction of heterogeneous migratory careers.

At the macro level we took into account the institutional gendered racism (Talpade Mohanty, 2003, De Genova, 2002) in Euro-American liberal democratic states. Such context determines migratory and gender regimes (Connell, 1990) which create citizenship laws, procedures and regulations (family reunification laws, citizenship acquisition, conditions of deportability) that influenced women's and men's mobility and capacity to engage in family making practices as well as their eventual confinement to racialized sectors of the labor market such as domestic work. In this respect, we particularly took into account Irma's undocumented status, as this created a spacialized social condition of deportability that constrained her daily life, and racialized her as a gender "illegal alien" (De Genova, 1999). While at the micro level we looked into how micro gender relations and idealized notions of motherhood (Christou, 2006; Glenn, 1999) influence their roles within their families. Nonetheless, we considered our participants' agencies (Giddens, 1979) and the strategies of resistance or conformity they developed through their different decisions of mobility. Lastly, we considered the circumstances as well as the continuous accumulation of mobility capital (Martiniello and Rea, 2014).

These objective and subjective factors affect our participants' access to the resources they could use to socially protect their children, which is ultimately the factor that played a decisive role in their decisions to return, circulate or re-immigrate. Contrary to earlier approaches to return migration (Stark, 1996) that theorize return as the definite moment in a migrant's trajectory, we follow recent trends and conceptualize return as a phase in the larger migratory career (Cassarino, 2004; Sayad, 1998). The qualitative methods of data collection and the analytical categories we devised to examine the subjects' life stories are presented as follows.

## *Methodology*

We first contacted Irma in Atlixco, Mexico in the summer of 2013. We met her in the context of a larger project that examines the scholarly trajectories of Mexican returnee students in regions with a high intensity of returnee or migrant children. Atlixco, a town located in the southern Mixteca region of the state of Puebla, belongs to this category (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005; Smith, 2006). As a fieldwork strategy to contact migrant children we offered and conducted workshops at public schools in Atlixco in order to inform parents and teachers about language transitions and ruptures children experience as they transit from English literacy to Spanish literacy.

Following this strategy several families were contacted. In the summer of 2013, Irma's family was the only family that gave us access to their return experience. The mistrust from the other families was apparently provoked by the stigma associated with returnee families, especially with those forced to return. When we met for the first time, Irma recounted living in New York City for 10 years and moving to Atlixco two years ago. She insisted on the social isolation she had felt in New York City and then in Atlixco, the town she considered home. Ever since our first meeting, Irma established a bond of trust with us due to the fact that we, unlike everyone else in her environment, were in fact interested in her experiences as a returnee mother. Over the years, we developed an ethical relation of co-construction of knowledge (Fernandes, 2013b:132; Haraway, 1997) in which we aimed to learn from Irma. The interviews with her were held for two or three hours. Together with Irma we carried out life story interviews and discussed themes of analysis and points of mutual interest. We have since then developed mutual trust and maintained a close relationship with her, and more recently with her husband, allowing us to further unveil the stages that guided her decision to return.

We have collected data through life story interviews conducted during visits to her hometown every six months and continuous telephone conversations. Through life story interviews we obtained data about cultures of motherhood and fatherhood, survival strategies, work objectives, the school trajectories of their children, Irma's deportability condition in the United States, and the family as well as local community support before and after return. We have continued to follow Irma's story through monthly telephone conversations. Although no fieldwork has been conveyed in New York City, we have tried to capture cross-border aspects of her family life through her narrative. Should Irma's family re-immigrate to the United States, there will be a follow-up study as well.

Based on the same feminist ethics of knowledge, on the other side of the Atlantic, Amelia was contacted in Brussels in the spring of 2014. Ever since, we have followed her story in Brussels, Lima and in the online space. The first author contacted Amelia during the pilot fieldwork of a PhD project that examines migrant domestic workers' cross-border strategies to access social protection. Amelia was approached at one of the many Latin American cultural events attended in search of participants. Amelia's case became particularly interesting for our contribution because, unlike other Peruvian women portrayed in previous studies (Escriva, 2005), she does not see herself as a self-sacrificing transnational mother but rather as a woman with "First World aspirations".

We gained Amelia's trust after multiple encounters both in Brussels and Lima. In the logic of co-construction of knowledge our relationship of trust with Amelia results from our positioning as Latin American women that have also experienced migration at some point of in our lives. This positioning has enabled occasional, situational and contextual dissipation of other class and ethnic boundaries (Shinozaki, 2012) that separated us. The data on Amelia's migratory career and experience of return have been gathered through: a) informal conversations that took place in Brussels, Lima and the online world, b) formal life story interviews conducted before and after her return from Brussels (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Similarly, Amelia's data contains information on notions of motherhood and fatherhood, strategies to regularize her migratory status, work objectives, the schooling and well-being of her school aged children as well as notions of family and community support received before and after her return. We have continued to follow Amelia's case through weekly communications with her and her family in Brussels via online instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

Additionally, in both cases we have conducted semi-structured interviews with other family members, which we have triangulated with the data obtained from the life story narratives. The data from these interviews allowed us to ascertain the role of other family members in the decision to return, specifically the point of view of Irma and Amelia's husbands.

The results of our data collection are retrospective, hence longitudinal life stories cover 15 years of their migratory careers and highlight their return as a particular moment within that period.<sup>2</sup> Life stories were an appropriate tool chosen with our participants to continuously reconstruct, observe and follow in real-life time specific events that marked the participants' migratory careers and consequently, their decisions to return (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

Moreover, by reconstructing their migratory careers through their narratives our participants have created a link between their experiences and the macro structures of opportunities and constraints that influenced their decisions to return. In line with our principles of co-creation of knowledge our participants have had the opportunity to co-interpret the data with us and to leave the research whenever they considered it was necessary (Newirk, 1996: 13; Anderson, 1998; Fernandes, 2013b: 135). There are, however, limits to such approach; their experiences are not necessarily common to all returnee migrant mothers. Their narrative, nonetheless, show the very ways in which women experience return.

What follows is the result of a collaborative effort, in which we coded the data into two major thematic categories impacting return: considerations about the social protection of children and the mothers' gendered, class personal goals and aspirations before and after return. We trace Amelia and Irma's biographical accounts as foundational narratives, in which negotiations around return migration took place at a particular moment in their migratory careers.

### **Migrant Mothers' Narratives of 'Return'. Irma's Migration from Atlixco to Brooklyn**

*"My husband said I was getting depressed, that I didn't look well and that we should give it a try. I mean, maybe the whole change of countries could help me..."*

*From a sewing shop in Atlixco to her in-laws' house in Brooklyn*

Irma is originally from Atlixco, Puebla. She is 42 years old and is the twelfth child in a family of thirteen siblings. Her family is from Atlixco and lives there, except for her brother and former business partner who lives in Puebla -40 minutes away from Atlixco-. Before migrating she had lived her entire life in Atlixco where she had worked in a sewing shop.

In the early 2000s, Irma and her sister married two brothers with dual Mexican/U.S. citizenship that had previously migrated to the United States and later on returned to Mexico in search of a wife. Irma met Ernesto at a family party and stayed in touch with him for a couple of years before marrying him in 2001 and then following him to Brooklyn, New York City, a place she had never

imagined leaving for. In fact, before leaving Atlixco Irma had dreamed of being a local fashion designer.

According to Martiniello and Rea (2014), migrants' lives are situated in particular contexts with rules and regulations that will in turn affect the outcomes of their migratory careers. Irma's migration reflects the changing nature of contemporary Mexican migration, which differs from earlier patterns. Today's migration displays a different gender and family composition, particularly in the Atlixco-New York City flow. The more recent circuit comprises numerous women and children (Zúñiga and Hernández-Léon, 2005), a fact that can be explained by the historical restrictive migration policies that have racialized Mexican migrants as "illegal" and were reinforced by the U.S. government during the 1990s and 2000s (De Genova, 2002; Cardenas, 1975: 86). In essence, these policies denied families the right to reside together, criminalized migrant members and forced long term separations (Dreby, 2012). In spite of these changes men continue to be the majority of Mexican international migrants and Mexican migration to the United States remains largely male-dominated (Cerutti and Massey, 2001). As illustrated by Irma's case, the decision to migrate is constrained by patriarchal norms and controlled by men who determine when and how they are to be joined by their women abroad (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Irma, Ernesto, her husband, was expected to leave his native Atlixco, Puebla and head north, following the example of his father and brothers. Ernesto crossed the border as a 16-year-old. He adapted well to his new life in New York City. As many men described in earlier literature, Ernesto had access to an important type of mobility capital, i.e. gendered family networks. He worked for 12 years unloading cargos and regularized his migratory status through his father (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). As many other men from his region of origin, he returned temporarily to his native Puebla in search of a Mexican wife in 2001.

Soon after their marriage, Ernesto informed Irma that they would relocate to New York City where his family lived. Unfortunately, the couple did not have enough knowledge to assess the difficulties Irma would face. Misleading information from Ernesto's family resulted in Irma's losing the opportunity to arrange her status before leaving for the United States.

In spite of such difficulties, Irma performed a risky action (Becker, 1963) that initiated her migratory career and crossed the border. It took her approximately 15 days to reach her final destination. Although the crossing was strenuous, thanks to a fortunate coincidence, she encountered a family that helped her reach her final destination and accompanied her to the bus in which she crossed the border.

### *Arriving in Brooklyn and learning how to be invisible*

Arriving in New York City seemed like an unexpected dream to Irma. Her migratory career was influenced by the context of fear that emerged in 2001 after the violent attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. These events reinforced the legitimization of undocumented foreigners' persecutions, stigmatizing them and labeling them as rule-breakers. Different forms of surveillance and repression were imposed on migrants' daily lives not only at borders but also in public places (Becker, 1963), (Coutin, 1993). Becker (1963) insisted that actors considered as deviant learn and implement daily routines to avoid trouble. Like other Mexican women described in previous studies, Irma paved her way to remain in Brooklyn for 10 years without returning to Mexico (Dreby and Schmalzbauer, 2013). Irma's palpable sense of deportability, the sole possibility of being removed from her family exacerbated her sense of vulnerability and marked the practices she implemented to hide her status (De Genova, 1999). First, she confined herself to the private sphere of her family home and avoided looking for employment. Irma contributed to the family income by sewing Halloween and Mexican traditional costumes for religious festivities.

### *Giving birth to her children and assessing the vulnerability of her irregular status*

In 2003, Irma gave birth to her first child. Having a first child meant a change in her social identity and life goals (Martiniello and Rea, 2011). Now she actively worried about access to public social protection, particularly in terms of formal healthcare and public education. Irma constantly feared the surveillance by immigration authorities, perpetuated by local police officers in public avenues and hospitals (Couting, 1993).

Right before my first child was born in 2003, my husband came to the hospital and told me: 'You were lucky they didn't get you. I mean, if you had been right there on the spot they would have taken you. They took everyone from one of those Hispanic supermarkets. Then, when Arturo, my second child was born in 2006, the police covered all streets from 42nd to 60th. They stopped, with their two minivans and asked everyone for papers and took some people away... Every time I gave birth to a child was like that, except with Maria in 2010, since she was born in a clinic, but even

then they undertook a raid nearby in a construction site. And even later during one of her medical checkups, the police walked in and the people working in the clinic didn't let them in.

As Irma gave birth to her second and third child, her family slowly became a mixed migratory status family (Dreby and Adkins, 2010). They did not share the same status and thus possessed different political and legal rights. Living in mixed migratory status families puts an enormous amount of stress on women like Irma who are constantly afraid of their eminent deportability which could eventually result in losing the custody of their minor children (Dreby, 2012). Irma learned new practices that permitted her to occupy public spaces without fear, such as distinguishing between different uniforms that indicated authority: "Well, since I got there. Let me tell you that the people who pick up the trash dress just like police officers in the border. I would run. I would hide if I saw one, I would hide. I would back up or walk inside a store and my husband would tell me: 'Relax, they won't do anything to you, they are just the public trash pickers, don't be afraid'".

Aside from these individual strategies Irma sought the support of her husband's extended family network. Her husband's family networks were, however, governed by patriarchal power relationships and sons' female partners had a tendency to be excluded (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). Additionally, Irma's fear of local law enforcement and a lack of legal status prevented her from accessing weak (Granovetter, 1983) ethnic networks that would help her maneuver through the difficulties of being an immigrant mother with school-aged children (Dreby and Schmalzbauer, 2013). In such circumstances, Irma developed a self-justifying rationale of a 'good mother' that stayed in the United States to provide her children with better access to public schools. Such rationale helped Irma neutralize her fears of deportation and offered her sound reasons to stay in the United States. In fact, by staying there, Irma constructed a positive self-image (Becker and Strauss, 1956: 258).

### *Considering return to protect her family*

In 2010, Irma's self-identity as a 'good mother' that stayed in the United States to protect her children disintegrated. Irma became extremely worried about a possible deportation that would separate her from her children. She knew her husband's family would not help if that were to happen. Irma also assessed the precarious economic situation the family faced after the financial crisis of 2007 which had

affected her husband's job security. For Irma, returning to Atlixco meant returning to her family home: "Since in Brooklyn there was no family, it was just us." Irma's expectation in terms of informal support she would receive from her extended family network in Mexico triggered the decision to return in 2011.

*Returning to Mexico and facing new vulnerabilities*

Upon her return, realities did not match Irma's expectations (Martiniello and Rea, 2011). She faced the disappointment of being betrayed by her brother and business partner whom she had supported financially for 10 years. Before the family's return her brother had promised Ernesto a job in the music store they had bought together. The promise broke down when Irma learned that her brother had led the store to bankruptcy and a starting monthly salary of 100 dollars he had promised Ernesto began to decrease. Irma's husband was left jobless in a state where 2.9% of the population is unemployed (STPS, 2016). Additionally, although it was not discussed in our interviews, Irma and her family also found themselves in a country where violence, particularly against women, has escalated over the last decade (Gomes, 2013).

Meanwhile, at her parents' home, Irma faced a disheartening reality. Her elderly parents were living in awful conditions. In spite of the remittances sent, Irma returned to a decrepit house. Her siblings avoided paying house bills and the entire family lived in deplorable conditions. Irma attributed her ignorance about the situation to her inability to physically visit her family periodically.

In addition to the hardships Irma faced in order to feed her family, schooling her children in Atlixco became a tremendous obstacle. Indeed, as other scholars have highlighted, the transition from American to Mexican schools to Mexican schools is not a straightforward process (Zúñiga and Hamman, 2014). In Atlixco, Irma's children experienced the difficulties of not knowing how to read and write in Spanish which, as described in earlier studies (Zúñiga and Hamman, 2014), encourages teachers to categorize such children as either lazy or problematic: "My kid Arturo is confused. He is 'mocho'. He is confused between English and Spanish. He doesn't even know what he speaks nowadays. And the teacher keeps on telling him that if it is not a matter of him not knowing how to speak Spanish than it must be an attention deficit disorder."

Recounting the experiences of her children in Mexican public schools, Irma remembers what public schooling is like in the United States: "Well, over there,

there is actual support if they happen to do poorly in math, then they have someone coaching them. And I mean the same thing with all the other subjects... They follow them through the learning process instead here..." It is precisely this ambiguous access to Mexican public schools that accept her children as students but do not necessarily recognize them as such that made Irma consider re-immigrating to the United States.

In 2014, after nearly 4 years in Atlixco, Irma's life goals evolved. She realized she wanted her children to receive higher education and secure a better future. She was under the impression that her migratory career and the sacrifices made thereby would only make sense if she accomplished this goal.

### *Going back to the Brooklyn?*

Irma has to deal with a number of obstacles. The precarious economic situation Irma and her family are facing, the lack of informal support from her extended family in Atlixco in addition to learning difficulties experienced by her children in Mexican public schools made her want to re-immigrate to New York City. Irma argues that while her children are living with her in Mexico, they are "missing on something", mostly on access to education, housing and healthcare, which they would have in the United States as citizens. Yet, she now wishes to go back to the United States as a legitimate migrant with a status that will allow her to often visit her family in Mexico while residing with her children in the United States (Martiniello and Rea, 2011).

Anew Irma's goal are significantly affected by the structures of socio-economic opportunities in receiving countries that fail to create the opportunities for family members to engage in productive and consumptive activities in the same physical location (Dreby and Adkins, 2010). In 2015, Irma visited the United States Consulate in Mexico to request family reunification under her husband's sponsorship. There she was informed of two deportation orders under her name: "I have been a bit stressed out. We went to the consulate as the lawyer explained. You know the papers I told you they gave us there, it was a deportation order issued while I was living there. I have to either get a waiver or stay in Mexico for 6 more years."

The deportation orders were issued while she was living in the United States, yet she had no knowledge of it until then. Since then, her family spent an enormous amount of money and time to pay for a pardon that could waive her deportation order. Unfortunately, the lawyers have told Irma her deportation orders banned

her from entering the United States even under family reunification for a period of 10 years, out of which four have now passed.

This last constraint has resulted in her family's temporary separation, at least physically. Irma stayed in Atlixco with the children while Ernesto returned to Brooklyn and sends remittances to pay for the lawyers working on Irma's case. Ernesto's daily calls keep them close although the physical separation of the family has triggered an emotional bargaining (Dreby, 2010) from the children, particularly from their oldest child who longs for his father's physical presence and guidance.

At present, Irma finds herself at a crossroads, having to choose between staying in Mexico and managing family from afar or sending her children alone to the United States while crossing the border irregularly, which she "wouldn't even consider doing again". Careers might, nonetheless, take unexpected turns; they are never unidirectional and might have unintended consequences (Martiniello and Rea, 2011). In our last conversations with Irma, she seemed to be experiencing a change in her social identity. Irma seemed worried about her family's current situation, but she had also decided to finish her secondary education. She considered this a strategy to dissipate her current situation, a way of "thinking about something else", at least for the time being.

## Amelia in Lima

*Returning was always an option; at first I didn't want to go back. I had hopes, I saw a future ahead of us but then one thing led to another... First they fired me from a day care center, then I couldn't finish school and suddenly Brussels wasn't really a paradise...*

### *From a kindergarten teacher to a migrant in Brussels*

Like Irma, Amelia was also in her early 30s when she emigrated in January, 2003. She is a mother of two children that were born in the receiving country. Amelia, however, possessed a different type of mobility capital (Martiniello and Rea, 2014). Her family in Lima is an internal migrant family that is originally from the coastal region of Pisco, Peru. In the 1950s Eva, her mother, immigrated to Lima, the urban epicenter of development in the country (Escriva, 2005). Like in other Peruvian families, the

oldest immigrated first to Lima whereas the younger generations slowly began to cross the Atlantic to reach other European destinations, initiating gendered selective migratory chains (Escriva, 2005).

As a young girl, Amelia's mother encouraged her to obtain a bachelor's degree if only to find a good husband that would provide for her. By contrast, her brother was encouraged to study medicine, pave his way through hard work and be a family provider. This patriarchal gender division of labor (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992) gave Amelia a distinctive social identity, although she strived to rebel against these principles. In 2002, Amelia was awarded a bachelor's degree in Education and started her own business with a group of friends. Unfortunately, the kindergarten they had founded failed to succeed. Following her first entrepreneurial endeavor, Amelia secretly asked her aunt that had lived in Europe since the 1980s to sponsor her quest to initiate a migratory career: "I knew that it would be my turn someday... At first, auntie Margarita took Rosa and then Laurita. None of them stayed... They were too spoiled to break a nail! They were all waiting to be saved up by Prince Charming. I just couldn't. I'm not like them! I had to leave and see life for myself. I didn't want to depend on my father and even less on another man."

### *Arriving in Brussels and facing new vulnerabilities*

Once in Brussels, just like Irma in New York City, Amelia faced discrimination in the public space. Such discrimination could be attributed to her gender and ethnicity as well as her undocumented status regarded as deviant by the mainstream population in the city. Peruvian women like Amelia, sponsored by a family member, arrive in the city on a tourist visa; however, they are often confronted with an irregular status once a 3-month granted period is over. Additionally, the Belgian labor market is strictly stratified in terms of ethnic and gender origins and Peruvian women like Amelia often find themselves working within ethnic niches such as domestic help, in spite of their educational capital (Camargo, 2014; Freitas and Godin, 2013).

Amelia understood the exploitative conditions of informal domestic work and began to look for ways to regularize her status. Like Irma, Amelia wanted to be a legitimate mover (Martiniello and Rea, 2011). She needed the sponsorship of a more experienced and qualified actor (Becker, 1963) to achieve success. Her condition as a domestic worker did not grant her the possibility of applying for a work permit since, in spite of its growing demands, the sector is not considered in

shortage of workers (Camargo, 2014). As opposed to Irma, Amelia chose to deal with her migratory status by marrying a Belgian man (Van Meeteren, 2009).

### *Marrying and becoming a legitimate mover*

Careers depend on *savoir-faire*, and unlike Irma, Amelia possessed a cultural capital that allowed her to search for the perfect groom on the Internet. Through an instant messaging chat she met Patrick, a Belgian man that married her in 2004. Chance, according to Martiniello and Rea (2011), might lead careers towards a bifurcation, reinforcing the actor's initial plans or possibly sending them towards an unwanted direction. In Amelia's case, Patrick's arrival reinforced her plans while grating her legal status.

Through marriage Amelia acquired a new subjective identity and experienced a change in her social positions (Adam *et al.*, 2002). She became a married woman, a legitimate mover, attached to a particular family configuration. She could make use of various resources and give a different meaning to her migratory career. She accessed the formal labor market, which in turn made her face a bifurcation. Amelia hesitated between working in the regular labor market to save money and invest in a business that would contribute to her retirement or being a housewife like the rest of her female cousins. She became a "professional domestic worker" within the newly established voucher system that hired her on hourly basis through prolonged temporary contracts (Camargo, 2014). As she had advanced economically she brought her mother over to take care of her newborn in 2006. At the time family reunification was still possible. At this point of in her migratory career Amelia described Brussels as a "place of opportunities" and Lima "as a place where family was left behind. A place to visit but not one to stay in".

### *Becoming a mother and developing professionally?*

By 2011, things had slightly changed for Amelia. She had a second child and although her children lived a dream life, attended free public Catholic schools and were well protected socially, she felt unaccomplished professionally and still perceived as just "*another domestic worker*". Despite her regularized migratory status, Amelia was not fully embraced by mainstream society (Becker, 1963). Indeed, employment agencies did not value her educational skills and still categorized her

as “first generation migrant women with a professional experience as a cleaner in Brussels.”<sup>4</sup> Amelia thus remained to be socially excluded in terms of her condition as a first generation migrant woman (De Genova, 1999).

In 2012, Amelia continued to work as a domestic worker and began to experience health issues, which her family doctor depicted as “physical troubles of domestic workers.” As in Irma’s case, Amelia’s social identity was profoundly changed after the birth of her children. Given the subjective nature of perceptions on success, Amelia attributed her own success as a mother to her ability to be a good role model, which she could not have accomplished by being just another “domestic worker”.

Amelia then tried to mitigate her confinement to domestic work. In 2013 she found a job at a daycare center but lost it for denouncing violence against children. Then she pursued a college degree in Brussels. She was not successful, however, given the fact that her French was considered “poor” and her previous education was “unvalued”.

### *Extended visits to Lima and considering return?*

Amelia returned to Lima in 2014 under the impression that she failed at a number of issues. This experience helped her reaffirm herself in different ways:

In Brussels I was evolving into a person I didn’t like. My brain was shrinking... In Lima, people looked at me straight in the eyes, there I was still an educated woman. Ultimately, if I couldn’t be happy none of us [her family members] would be happy. Each time I visited Lima I wanted to stay forever. I wanted to start a daycare center, a business... Really just anything but I didn’t want to go back.

After a few extended visits to Lima in January, 2015 she continued to be unemployed. At this point Amelia renewed her efforts to succeed in Brussels and decided to apply for an internship at the Belgian French Community Internship Program in the Communication and Technology State Department. Unfortunately, she failed to be selected. “This was it. I had it. I sat down with Patrick and told him: ‘Listen: we need to go on with plan B. I’m leaving for Lima. I’m taking little Anthony with me. I know he would be too much of a burden and over there he would be better taken care of. Valeria can finish school and stay here with you and mom. You all will come when once I’m settled in Lima.’”

Amelia thought her financial situation would improve in Lima where her networks of friends and her credentials would help her advance professionally.

*Returning to Lima and facing other obstacles*

In February, 2015 we followed Amelia to Lima and found a slightly different woman with renewed goals and feeling guilty for being judged as “a bad mother that took her children away from a good society (Belgian society).” In her extended family’s view on education, her children could be better provided for in the Belgian society. She also found herself in a violent Lima, a place where violence against women was perpetuated publically in all spheres. Despite the country’s economic growth, 370,000 residents in Lima (out of which 8.6% were women) were unemployed (INE, 2015, Boesten, 2012).

In spite of such context and the gender barriers she faced at home where her extended family questioned her ways of being “a married woman”, Amelia persisted in her choices. She tried to start a business in the cleaning sector, followed by a daycare center. When her attempts failed, Amelia searched for a job. Given her age and class background, she was unsuccessful: “French speaking schools in Miraflores (a wealthy district of Lima) will only hire young rich chicks.”

Despite the circumstances, at this point Amelia considered, her return as a success. Anthony, her youngest child, “was doing better in school” than in Brussels where he was often picked on and considered a child with special educational needs. By April, 2015, Amelia had acquired a new self-rationale of a ‘good mother’ whose life goal was to become “a household manager”. This new self-rationale counterbalanced a sense of failure at becoming a professional woman and furnished her with sound reasons to stay in Lima.

By May, 2015, Amelia had managed to negotiate a financial allowance from her husband Patrick in Brussels, and her father in Lima, which paid for children’s private education. Her brother, a well-known doctor, searched for the best specialist to treat Anthony’s attention deficit disorder. Simultaneously, Patrick organized the family’s move, sending the furniture and disciplining Valeria and Amelia’s mother. At the time, Amelia’s older daughter and Amelia’s mother were rather reluctant to leave Brussels. Patrick instead seemed stressed but confident that moving could make him “recuperate his role as the male in the family” and in his words “the Peruvian society would give him an opportunity to be the father he has always dreamt of being.”

### *Return to settle for life?*

As time went by, Amelia, like Irma, also experienced a slight change in her perspective of on her return experience. In July, 2015, she assumed that she was not completely ready to return to Lima. She was employed as a French teacher, which made her feel “a little less guilty about taking the decision to leave.”

By September, 2015, Valeria, Amelia’s oldest daughter and Amelia’s mother had arrived in Lima. Amelia informally inherited her mother’s house in Lima and equipped it with elaborated Belgian appliances that were shipped by her husband. Amelia’s professional life, however, has been put on hold, but in her view, return has been a success because, unlike Irma, she has had the support of her extended family. At this point, however, return has deeply influenced Amelia’s social identity. When we first met Amelia in 2014, she expected to be “a First World professional woman.” At present she aspires to be a housewife to fulfill her duties as a mother: “The most important thing is that they can always go back to attend the university. I just want to be the best mother I can be. Sometimes it is conflicting to be with my family, they are great but they want to educate my children too... I do my best. I take them to therapy. They attend the best schools. I will do everything for my babies.”

### *Two experiences of return and one common goal*

Despite different institutional and cultural contexts, both Amelia and Irma are working their ways through their migratory careers while trying to accumulate resources to be able to guarantee the social protection of their children formally and informally. In Atlixco, Irma struggles to re-emigrate to the United States; a country where she thinks her children will have access to adequate social protection structures. Meanwhile in Lima, Amelia starts a new life in a city where she thinks her children will enjoy a home and family support.

These women’s decisions to migrate, circulate and return do not take place in a vacuum. Their migratory careers and return decisions are greatly influenced by the structures of opportunities and constraints regulating their access to the resources that will eventually protect them as well as their children. Such resources interact with the support of their extended family networks and ultimately, the last two factors interact with their gendered, racialized and class identities as mothers and women striving to find their place in either receiving or sending countries. In

what follows we discuss the interaction of the latter factors, which play a crucial role in these women's mobility decisions.

## Discussions

Irma and Amelia have one trait in common: they, like many other women, want to become 'good mothers'-fulfilling the respective ethical, financial, and emotional dimensions. Like an increasing number of global women, they find themselves in the middle of binational contexts and legal restrictions. Indeed, their life stories show how contemporary international migratory circuits are transforming social definitions of motherhood (Hodagneu-Sotelo, 1997). Amelia and Irma's return constitutes one particular complex moment of in their migrant careers. In both cases, the return decision does not entail a permanent come back to the homeland. Instead, returning triggers new dilemmas and changing strategies. In Amelia and Irma's stories, the struggles of mothering concur with personal migratory tactics.

Hence, Irma and Amelia's life stories reflect the complicated negotiations international migrant mothers face when trying to strategize their decisions of international mobility. Their life stories show that although both women have distinct standpoints in terms of their class origins, the logic of accumulating resources intended for the social protection of their binational children became a key factor that affected their decision to return. Throughout their migratory careers Irma and Amelia have prioritized and idealized different elements in the social protection of their children and strategized return accordingly while taking into account: 1- their individual perceptions of "good motherhood" which are defined within particular sets of social relations that are gender and class, 2- the internalization of socio-economic structural constraints and 3- opportunities in sending and receiving countries and their access to informal resources of community and family networks (Martiniello and Rea, 2011).

In Irma's case, the decisions to immigrate, return and re-immigrate were, as we observed, greatly influenced by the division of gender roles that often shapes migratory decisions in Mexican families, attributing women the role of permanent and immobile caretakers. Irma has constructed the gender identity of a protective mother whose role is to accompany her children through their educational paths whether in her sending or receiving country. In Irma's narrative we perceive her worries about her children well-being, which made her orchestrate a return to avoid

a traumatic separation after a possible deportation. Her frustrating return to Atlixco triggered a decision to re-immigrate to the United States with them to ameliorate their educational opportunities. Irma attempted to prevent what Dreby (2010) described as families “divided by borders”. Simultaneously, Irma’s social identity evolved as she faced family life alone for the first time. Irma wants to avoid a re-immigration through irregular channels that will once again confine her to the private sphere, and in parallel intents to finish secondary school.

Irma’s strategies are situated in two nation states that constrain her family life and limit the opportunities to fulfill her children’s social protection needs (Martiniello and Rea, 2014). On the one hand, in the United States Irma is denied the opportunity to reside with her American citizen children on the same territory. On the other hand, although the Mexican State grants Irma and her children equal rights to reside on its territory as citizens, the insufficient social protection structures in terms of education hinders an opportunity for her children to advance in their education curriculum. Ironically, Irma learned one lesson: her children were not welcomed in Atlixco schools. Additionally, Irma is confronted with the absence of support from her (working class) extended family both in New York City and in Atlixco.

In Amelia’s case, the ideal of a good mother, both as a provider of care and financial assets is built upon the social remittances (Levitt, 1998) she has been able to accumulate from the Peruvian and Belgian societies. Unlike Irma, Amelia comes from a society in which female led migration for selected labor circuits in North America and Europe has been common for at least the last two decades. Amelia is influenced by the values of the urban centers where she has lived and where society promotes men and women as contributors to the family’s financial and emotional well-being. Additionally, her documented status permitted her to physically and socially navigate through these two societies. This status enabled her to better calculate her return strategies while accommodating her needs to become a ‘good mother’ and advancing professionally. Upon her return to Lima, Amelia found an ethnically and class stratified labor market and poorly structured public social protection. However, contrarily to Irma, Amelia came back to an urban center where her middle class working family was able to support her, at least financially. Amelia considers this support extremely valuable and has decided to stay in Lima at least until her children start the university. Indeed her children are adapting to their lives in a comfortable neighborhood as the family contribute to their private education and health access. Since then Amelia relied on a new self-rationale of a “household manager” that deeply cares for her children.

Both Irma and Amelia went through a sequence of steps that guided them into thinking the return would be the best option to socially protect their children. Amelia and Irma's life stories might suggest that migratory moves between at least two countries would be a part of these women's migratory careers for as long as their children continue to be excluded in one way or another from formal or informal social protection systems, either in receiving or sending states. These two international migrant mothers are likely to continue negotiating their migratory moves and migrating to the space that offers the best opportunities in terms of social protection access at particular moments in their children's life-course.

Our analysis captured how these two women with very distinct gendered, class and race standpoints strategize their return differently while trying to face similar challenges. On the one hand, the Peruvian case discloses how a female led labor migration background gave Amelia an opportunity to be mobile and to return with some support to her country of origin. Amelia, however, remains unable to meet her ideals of success both as a professional middle class woman and as a mother of two children. Whereas in the Mexican case, we observed how a male led labor migration circuit, in which women are slowly being incorporated, constrained Irma's mobility and made her return to avoid the fear of deportation. Irma remains unable to attain her goals as she sees her children facing difficulties in their scholarly paths, which makes her consider the possibility of re-emigrating. In conclusion, our contribution has provided a multi-level analytical framework capturing the diversity of macro objective and micro-meso subjective dimensions of contemporary international migrant mothers' strategies of return migration (Dreby and Adkins, 2010b). †

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Race is used as an organizing principle that operates in post-colonial societies or other advanced economies, where social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories (Talpade Mohanty, 2003). We by no means adhere to the existence of various biological races.
- <sup>2</sup> Life story interviews are originally in Spanish, our analyses are verbatim translations selected from recorded transcripts or field-notes.
- <sup>3</sup> While in our view this is the dominant trend, we recognize a strand of qualitative studies which have covered examples of women who migrate independently of men in order to support their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> A study conducted in 2015 by the Brussels' Labor Observatory has shown that 5 out of every 10 women that requested a revalidation of their bachelor's degree in Brussels had their applications denied (Englert and Geczynski, 2015).