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Rural indigenous women and poverty. The impacts of disadvantages versus resources

ABSTRACT: This study exposes the impacts of poverty on women in an indigenous municipality in Oaxaca with very high marginalization, by identifying resources, strategies and their effectiveness in women's lives, from the theoretical approach of accumulated disadvantages. The ethnographic method was used through direct observations and interviews with a culturally situated gender perspective. The findings suggest that family migration was a survival strategy that encouraged access to assets during the 20th century, however, in recent decades the income generated by migration has lost relevance in total income to reduce poverty. Likewise, social programs have contributed to sustaining families but have not been able to avoid the migration of women and their families. The results of this work raise renewed perspectives to study the poverty of this new century, under other categories that lead to new strategies to understand and reduce it.

KEYWORDS: Rural women; poverty; social inequality; migration.

Mujeres indígenas rurales y pobreza. Los impactos de las desventajas frente a los recursos

RESUMEN: El presente estudio expone los impactos de la pobreza en las mujeres de un municipio indígena de Oaxaca de muy alta marginación, al identificar los recursos, las estrategias y su efectividad en la vida de las mujeres, desde el enfoque teórico de las desventajas acumuladas. Se utilizó el método etnográfico mediante observaciones directas y entrevistas con perspectiva de género, culturalmente situada. Los hallazgos sugieren que la migración familiar fue una estrategia de sobrevivencia que incentivó el acceso a activos durante el siglo XX, sin embargo, en las últimas décadas los ingresos generados por la migración han perdido relevancia en el ingreso total para disminuir la pobreza. Asimismo, los programas sociales han contribuido al sostenimiento de las familias, pero no han logrado evitar la migración de las mujeres y sus familias. Los resultados de este trabajo plantean perspectivas renovadas para estudiar la pobreza del nuevo siglo, bajo otras categorías que conlleven a estrategias para comprenderla y reducirla.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Mujer rural; pobreza; desigualdad social; migración.

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Introduction

Experts on poverty questioned the approach that praises the survival effectiveness of people experiencing poverty through their family strategies encouraged by the empirical evidence obtained through the last decade of the 20th century (Roberts, 2006; Feijóo, 2003). This perspective questioned that people in poverty were not only increasing numerically but that their inequalities were deepening due to ever more extensive precariousness processes.

Since 1980, poverty has become evident as a phenomenon linked to both rural regions and urban areas that received waves of migrant communities affected to a large extent by neoliberal policies (Roberts, 2006). Migration to cities did not bring the desired benefits to rural regions, though remittances contributed to family survival, they were insufficient to substantially improve living conditions in those areas.

Thus, between 1980 and 1990, poverty analyses were influenced by various analytical perspectives on the resources that people in poverty use as effective elements to face their adversities. As a result, the concept of poverty was linked to others such as survival strategies (Duque and Pastrana, 1973; González de la Rocha, 1986a, 1986b), social capital (Moser, 1996, 1992) or marginality (Adler, 1993). These frameworks allowed an understanding of families under a response model against to the numerous transformations in their environments; however, the most commonly used is focused on survival strategies since:

The poor have always had strategies for the day-to-day coping with low incomes, high consumer prices, and inadequate or unreliable economic and social infrastructure. But to withstand sudden economic shocks or longer-term economic crises, households must be able to survive such periods without irreversible damage to the productive capacity of their members and to their net asset position (Moser, 1996, p. 24).

This survival strategies approach highlighted the adaptive capacity of impoverished families, arguing that the sum of diverse resources generated by the strategies was intended to minimize the ravages of poverty (Moser, 1996).

From rural sociology studies, a large amount of research emerged that concluded on the strategic nature of families in their search for survival. Therefore, rural sectors coincided in diversification, pluriactivity or multi-activity, which consists on families adopting multiple survival strategies such as migration, salaried work, and self-employment in the non-agricultural sector to supplement family income (Berdegué, Ramírez, Reardon & Escobar, 2001; Mora & Cerón, 2015).

According to Berdegué et al. (2001), the factors that influence households to diversify are: low income, lack of infrastructure, extended families, lower level of schooling or lack of access to land; consequently, diversification is a survival strategy for poor households. These factors are mostly found in agricultural settings with low potential, exposed to droughts, floods and environmental degradation (Haggblade, Hazell & Reardon, 2010; Liu, 2017). In other words, poorer households engage in activities that allow them to ensure their survival. Thus, motivations for diversification strategies are variable in terms of household, location, assets, opportunities, institutions, and social relations characteristics (Mora & Cerón, 2015; Avila-Foucat & Rodríguez-Robayo, 2018). In the case of rural households in Mexico, diversification into non-agricultural activities is supported by two main routes: through cash transfer programs (government transfers through programs such as *Procampo* and *Prospera*) and regional or international remittances (De Janvry & Saudolet, 2001).

A contextual aspect that has affected the economic conditions of households has been the neoliberal policies that generated harmful repercussions on both formal and informal labor markets, causing the so-called survival strategies to lose effectiveness. Because of that, rural sectors went from a scarce family subsistence to an insufficient subsistence, which has caused more repeated and difficult crises.

González de la Rocha (2004) suggests that focusing on survival strategies is not sufficient to describe what happens within families living in poverty, because the "poverty resources" are inexhaustible due to their capacity to adapt to the objectives of the family group, and they are also limited, which affects their subsistence. The findings of their studies show that "poverty resources" is obsolete for understanding the phenomenon and

suggest updating the analytical-conceptual approaches while verifying quantitative observations with empirical research.

Meanwhile, Safa (2004) described that survival strategies were going through a macro-structural crisis, because people living in poverty identified State decisions (laws and public policies) as part of their adversities, and it is challenging for people in poverty to endure in the face of the accumulation of political and economic guidelines imposed on them. In this sense, changing State policies have been a banner of struggle for certain groups that recognize government actions as “impediments to survival”. This has led to the creation of movements in defense of land, health, the environment, democracy, and education. Also, these are groups that identify the denial of their rights in the face of the high cost imposed by the policies of international financial organizations.

In the last two decades of this century, a conceptual-theoretical arsenal has emerged to delve deeper into the versatility of poverty, as well as proposals to analyze the processes of production and reproduction of life beyond precariousness, such as the proposed by Fernández and Perelman (2020). In addition, several concepts have surfaced intending to look at the effects of poverty through different lenses: inequality (Kessler, 2014), social exclusion (Saraví, 2006; Roberts, 2004, 2006), social isolation (Kaztman, 2001, 1999; Filgueira, 2001), cumulative disadvantages (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007; González de la Rocha & Villagómez, 2006; Saraví & Bayón, 2006, González de la Rocha, 2004), all of them distance themselves from the survival strategies approach by suggesting that poverty has diversified as well as its impacts. Therefore, the resources of intending to look have lost effectiveness in the face of increasingly adverse environments.

The concept of cumulative disadvantages –which is used in this research– emerged at the beginning of this century and aims to better understand the social processes that account for the erosion of personal and family resources in contexts of vulnerability and social inequality. It has the capacity to analyze subjective aspects of the lives of people living in poverty diachronically and synchronically, and allowing to understand the differences in depth and inequality among members of the same family or group by analyzing the effects differentiated by gender and age. Thus, the question of the study is:

How do the effects of these cumulative disadvantages occur in the spheres of gender inequalities that permeate women's lives?

This study captures the definition of poverty from the narrative of women in their daily lives thus identifying the resources and strategies implemented for their survival through the ethnographic method that consisted of direct observations and interviews. These narratives come from indigenous women from the poorest municipality in Mexico, according to the estimates of the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política Social Nacional* (Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy) (CONEVAL, 2020), hence alluding to the cumulative disadvantages associated with social historical-processes both locally situated and structural, but also given by unequal gender relations.

The document is organized as follows: the second section details the cumulative disadvantages concept as an analytical framework for the research, followed by the methodology used and a description of the women who collaborated with the research, as well as the context of the municipality of the study. The next section presents the findings that emphasize the meanings of poverty from the women's perspective, as well as the resources and strategies deployed in the presence of adverse situations where migration and social programs become relevant. Finally, we outline some final reflections on the cumulative disadvantages and the effects on women's lives.

Cumulative Disadvantages

As a starting point, we have Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit's (2007) concept of disadvantage: "We define disadvantage as a lack of genuine opportunities for secure functionings" (p. 9). The authors recognize that theories of equality do not have an appropriate approach since it is not possible to achieve equality without first noticing and resolving the enormous differences previously established between vulnerable groups, or at least understanding how these differences operate. The concept of disadvantage is related to poverty because it refers to a broader comparative framework where disadvantage is multifaceted in nature, while low-income poverty can play a role in the loss of advantages.

Disadvantages are based on a relational idea, that is, the comparison of the resources of one against the others, thus forming vulnerabilities, and the authors cited above elaborate a theory on the knowledge of disadvantages where these may be structurally supported. However, their impacts can be observed in all the members of the family beyond the interference of the labor markets.

For Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), vulnerability is a grouping of disadvantages whose manifestation is plural and tends to form clusters that corroborate each other and cause the erosion of both social and personal relationships. Consequently, disadvantages find their greatest vulnerability effect in the clusters, this means that there is no rule to evaluate which disadvantage causes the greatest vulnerability effect, but rather how they behave as a unit (Aguilar & López, 2016).

For González de la Rocha and Villagómez (2006), disadvantages accumulate causing negative impacts. These authors describe cumulative disadvantages as the links between phenomena, for example: unemployment and the atomization of families, precarious work, and the worsening of poverty. However, the grouping exercise does not consist of adding up disadvantages with unidirectional impacts, but in the multiple effects and cumulative nature of these disadvantages that interfere in various areas of life in a dynamic way. This analysis was generated from studies that confirmed that the resources of people in poverty were increasingly scarce and of a finite nature, despite having social or mutual aid networks, it cost them greater effort to obtain them. Therefore, social capital also seems to have limits when disadvantages seem to accumulate in certain subjects or groups.

For example, according to González de la Rocha (2004), the most transcendental impact of the cumulative process is labor exclusion, which directly affects other areas and results in the inability to act and react, causing a greater vulnerability. Regarding the research on urban poverty, the authors Saraví and Bayón (2006) showed that in Argentina people in poverty tended to group together by geographic tendency, which meant that they formed neighborhood niches in conjunction with others. Similarly, Aguilar and López (2016) found that the population of peripheral localities and suburbs of Mexico City present

more significant social exclusion, which is perceptible by the lack of services and low income. In addition, diachronic cut studies showed that people in poverty were increasingly poorer:

The cumulative disadvantages refer to the growing inability to be part of social constellations and flows of reciprocity and solidarity, as well as the undermined capacity to participate in self-provisioning activities [...] since the resources of the poor cannot be activated, and in effect, clear similarities appear between the social and economic features of yesteryear with the resource poverty and increased vulnerability of the contemporary world (González de la Rocha, 2004, p. 194).

From the foregoing, we point out that in rural contexts, multiactivity or migration were generally seen as effective strategies, but a look from the cumulative disadvantages allows us to reflect on the repercussions since the processes of asset generation, accumulation of disadvantages and their agglutination experience phenomena that go from the macro to the micro and vice versa (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007; González de la Rocha, 2014).

In this manner, the classic poverty analysis differentiated people in poverty who manage to climb towards better welfare conditions under the concept of survival strategies. This “comfortable” framework allowed to maintain an optimistic attitude of impoverished people towards their condition (González de la Rocha, 2007). However, empirical evidence showed that while some poor people manage to mitigate their situation, there are others who are confined to a prospect of greater exclusion and inequality. It is in the latter that the disadvantages had relational effects when grouped or accumulated (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007; Aguilar & López, 2016).

Methodology

Because it is relevant to recover the narratives of the women who have been invisibilized in history and science (Maffia, 2007), the ethnographic research was approached with a culturally situated gender perspective, focused on understanding the gaze of women who show a situated and contextual knowledge (Sciortino, 2012). In this line, the meanings and

interpretations women express about poverty were analyzed, emphasizing the relational processes of disadvantage. For Haraway (1993), situated knowledge will give reason to identities constructed in the places from which women position themselves in the face of hegemonic discourses.

It is important to emphasize that the analysis differentiated by gender, or under this perspective, understands gender relations not independently but at all levels of organization, as well as acknowledging the differences between ways of working, their conditions, their compensations and responsibilities, in addition to the ideals of being and ought to be of each gender (Jackson, 2003).

The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in two periods during 2019 through in-depth interviews, participant observations and informal talks. In the first stage, a monograph was prepared to document the general population's life, emphasizing the resources and strategies of the families in the face of poverty through questions about childhood memories.

Once the first general monographic phase was completed, the research focused on understanding the information provided only by women. Thirty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with women (cf. Table 1), the selection of interlocutors derived from participant observation in the community and the "snowball" strategy: 8 women over 65 years old, 13 women between the ages of 45 and 65, 16 young women between the ages of 20 and 45. In addition to informal talks documented in field diaries, direct observation accompaniment and participant observation in private and public spaces such as assemblies and community events. All the women interviewed are Mixtec and Spanish speakers.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of women interviewed by age group.

Number of interviews	Age group	Schooling	Number of children	Productive activities
8	Over 65 years old.	Six women had no schooling at all, and two had not completed elementary school.	Women who had between four and ten children (children died in six cases).	Seasonal agriculture, backyard animal husbandry, migration to cities in other states, domestic work and handmade palm weaving.
13	From 45 to 64 years old.	Four women with no schooling at all, the rest with incomplete elementary school.	Women who had between five and nine children.	Seasonal agriculture, backyard animal husbandry, migration to cities in other states, domestic work and handmade palm weaving.
16	From 20 to 44 years old.	Thirteen women with incomplete elementary school, and three with completed elementary school. No cases with junior high school education.	Women who had between four and ten children (some women are still of reproductive age).	Seasonal agriculture, backyard animal husbandry, migration to cities in other states, domestic work and handmade palm weaving.

Source: Own elaboration (2022).

With an emphasis on a diachronic approach (Pizarro, 2001), the information focused on understanding the changes within the families derived from the survival strategies implemented in their life stories. Thus, observation of family dynamics required identifying them in the time and space of the migratory processes. We chose to focus on microanalysis alongside macroanalysis in order to highlight the changes in families concerning labor markets, structural policies, and international productive changes.

The excerpts from interviews with women cited in the paper were chosen because they are representative of a generalized sociocultural context. In qualitative studies, the representation of a phenomenon is not given by the number of interviews but by the repetition of responses among people, along with the depth of the information. There was no age classification of the women that commanded the interest of the research since the diachronic approach would allow us to understand similarities and possible differences. It should be noted that all interviewees consented to provide information; in all cases, pseudonyms are used for identity protection.

Contextual overview of the municipality under study: Santos Reyes Yucuná

Santos Reyes Yucuná is a municipality located in the northwest of the State of Oaxaca, in the Mixteca region (Langlé et al., 2018). According to data from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) (INEGI 2020a), this municipality is made up of 5 localities and has a population of 1,474 inhabitants, from which 51.3% are women and the rest are men. There are 190 inhabited residences and 53 uninhabited due to the effects of migration (INEGI, 2020b). This population is characterized by being very young, as the majority age groups are from 0 to 14 years old (with 261 people), followed by between 15 and 29 years old (with 197 people) (INEGI, 2020b).

Langlé et al. (2018) report that the main activity in the municipality is seasonal subsistence agriculture. In addition to the traditional cultivation of the milpa system (zucchini, beans and corn), other products that are planted are yellow chili, tomato, green tomato, and to a lesser amount radish, carrot and other horticultural plants, which are not

frequently planted because they require significant levels of water. Although with less intensity, the community is involved in animal husbandry for sale and the production of palm handicrafts, although the latter is only performed by elderly adults.

This municipality has high poverty levels and social deprivation (CONEVAL, 2017). It has been considered the municipality with the highest percentage of poverty in all of Mexico (CONEVAL, 2020). In addition, 74.8% of its inhabitants have food deprivations, 91.6% do not have access to basic services in housing, 50.2% do not have decent housing, 95.1% lack social security, and 77.4% do not have access to health services (CONEVAL, 2017).

The educational conditions of Yucuná's population demonstrate high levels of backwardness (40.8%) (CONEVAL, 2017). The average degree of schooling in this municipality is lower compared to the state, amounting to 4.7 years in contrast to 7.5 years at the state level.

Regarding the existing social infrastructure, according to data from the *Directorio Estadístico Nacional de Unidades Económicas* (National Statistical Directory of Economic Units in English) (INEGI 2020a), the municipality has two health centers (INEGI, 2020b), however, they lack medical personnel and equipment. Meanwhile, there are 15 educational establishments in the municipality that cover basic education (general and indigenous) (Langlé et al., 2018). As well, they have a Diconsa store, a Liconsa milk supply establishment and a childcare center *Secretaría del Bienestar* (Welfare Secretary) (SEBIEN 2020). Given the scarce social infrastructure in the municipality, its inhabitants depend on bank, administrative, educational, and economic services from the Huajuapán de León city, located an hour and a half from Yucuná (Langlé et al., 2018).

Ethnically, Yucuná is a municipality with a high indigenous presence: 98.99% consider themselves indigenous; 97.67%, older than three years, speak some indigenous language, and 25.86% of indigenous language speakers are monolingual (INEGI, 2016). Langlé et al. (2018) point out that this municipality is part of a region characterized by its multiculturalism since different indigenous languages and cultures (Triqui, Chocholteco,

Amuzgo, Cuicateco and Ixcateco) coexist in this space. It should be added that the native language spoken is Mixteco in its variant from the northwest of Oaxaca.

Yucuná is governed by the internal normative system. In Yucuná, the general assembly consists of community members who elects the *cabildo* (town council) authorities and agrarian representatives. The term of office in the municipal administration is three years. Moreover, it is the current municipal authorities, along with the representatives of the agencies and localities, who are in charge of convening the assembly for the renewal of municipal power (Langlé et al., 2018).

Findings

While the origins of poverty are multi-causal, poverty may be one of the main disadvantages related to many other problems and is a determinant of welfare losses. Among the multiplying effects of poverty, it is very likely that a woman born into poverty will grow up and die without changing her situation, and there is even a high probability that her children will repeat the same pattern, mainly women, due to their historical inequality condition. In view of the above, it is important to conduct a situational analysis in order to understand how poverty is defined, how it is experienced and, finally, how it correlates in a multiplier effect with other disadvantages.

According to the table in the methodological section, one of the first findings is in the reiteration of women's profiles in terms of age groups, since in their schooling conditions, they achieve a slight increase regarding the schooling of the previous age groups. However, women between the ages of 20 to 65 and over are essentially similar in terms of the number of children they have and the productive activities they perform. To understand this continuity of profiles, we must understand the strategies, alluding to culture and subsistence through the accumulation of family labor in the face of precarious scenarios. This does not mean that slight changes in schooling are not significant in changing family reproductive strategies and the jobs that women perform; this is discussed in more detail below.

Poverty as a disadvantage

The women interviewed defined poverty as: the lack of elements that provide well-being, which causes many deep-rooted problems, "poverty is to have nothing, a poor person would be when a person has nothing or has little or very little" (María, 46-year-old woman, illiterate). On the other hand:

It means that a person who is poor suffers from a lack of resources to be able to live, or doesn't have enough to be well, that's why it's very difficult [...] for example in an illness, one doesn't have enough to buy medicine or to go to the doctor, we have enough to eat, but that's all, we don't have enough for many other things that are necessary (Graciela, 36-year-old woman, studied until the third year of elementary school).

Poverty is the resource shortage that provides well-being and solvency in the face of life's circumstances. In this introspection made by women, it is essential to understand that poverty is a phenomenon with centripetal forces that expand its action range towards different personal and social spheres. For example, in the previous quote, it was said that it had an impact on health, and in the prior, on well-being in general, but also on other spheres such as the formation of human capital and the possibility of social mobility:

Because we were poor, we couldn't study. I wanted to study, but I couldn't, neither could my siblings. At most, we learned to read and write, after that, we just worked [...] I hope that my children are able to study so they can have a better life, but it is very difficult (Inés, 48-year-old woman, studied up to sixth grade of elementary school).

The biographies of the women interviewed reveal recurring stories from their childhood. They mention an early insertion into the labor markets as a result of migration to the cities of Mexico and Puebla, which allows other ways of understanding poverty from their communities, thus showing a superposition of precariousness since now they were not only peasants but also rural-urban migrants, informal street workers, unskilled labor and other conditions. As Feijoó (2003) and Estivil (2003) point out, a series of events in the last decades of the last century caused rural regions to enter into other types poverty; for instance, peasants became migrants or traders involved in multiple activities, while maintaining a precarious standard of living despite these new efforts.

The migration experienced in the 1980s-1990s did not allow them a substantive social ascent, as they worked in highly precarious labor niches such as street vendors; and in the 21st century as beggars, street singers or car washers (Morales, 2021).

The lack of local income has been pointed out as the main driving force for migration due to the absence of sources of employment, since at least 16 women interviewed indicated that agriculture is seasonal and their harvests are only enough for self-consumption. Likewise, as another traditional activity is weaving hats, *petates*¹ and other palm objects. Nevertheless, the income obtained is quite low, since the payment for a hat ranges between 12 and 15 pesos, and its elaboration requires at least 8 hours of weaving, and it is worth mentioning that this activity is only made by older adults and women in their daily activities.

In the words of the municipal *cabildo* (town council) authorities, nowadays, more than 90% of the people in the municipality migrate to Mexico City and, to a lesser extent, to other cities. In the community, only elderly people who are no longer able to work reside on a long-term basis. It is remarkable that migration has been preferred over other possible activities and even over education. According to the analytical corpus mentioned in previous pages, the reason behind this is that migration is a survival strategy widely used by families living in poverty, even though its positive impacts are often debatable.

Remunerated activities allowed them to obtain income for family subsistence and the consolidation of modest assets that they enjoy today, for example: building a house, buying land, acquiring backyard animals, as well as opening small businesses such as commodity stores, stationery stores, or others.

From the approach of cumulative disadvantages, in spite of these assets, their narratives tell us about the different depths in which poverty can be shown and experienced in the thin line between having little and having very little:

I am poor [...] because I don't have, well [...], I don't have anything, for example, I don't even have a house. That's my mother-in-law's house... my mother-in-law at least has a house [...] I do consider myself poor because, I mean, the water, if the water runs out, we

¹ A mat or matting made of dried palm leaves or grass.

have to fill our demijohn at a well, a river that's down here, and carry it. I don't even have money to buy what I need, washing soaps, food, no, I don't have it, and with what my husband earns it's not enough.

What do we do? What we can do every week and so on all the time, we do something here, we go to Puebla, we earn a little, they lend us a little, we pay, and we are always the same (Interview. Silvia, 42 years old, finished elementary school).

Migrating does achieve something, but it takes a long time, years, and then you have a house and my neighbor put up a little shop with what they earned from working in Mexico, but that's all [...], then you can't keep traveling because you're already old, so we get stuck and have no way to move forward, because here in town there's nothing, no work and therefore no money (Interview. Ester, 52 years old, no schooling).

These statements show us the effects of these multiple inequalities that will ultimately form superimposed layers or what some authors call clusters of disadvantages. Although women do not fall into a survival crisis shock, due to the palliative effects of family strategies, they do experience a decrease in their quality of life since they live in overcrowded conditions, do not have access to basic services such as water, and demands increase without expanding their response capacities, so migration is considered the only way to survive. Moreover, the effects of poverty these women are already exposed to have a severe impact on their morale and dignity:

How can I not be ashamed to live like this? Asking for money in the street? Being pitiful? Taking food from a dog in the street to eat it! (Interview. Juana, 39 years old, elementary school unfinished).

In Mexico, the house we lived in, regarding services, was somewhat better. But, the quality of the places they rented was very difficult. I say it was degrading because the people in the cities sometimes see us coming from the towns and they rent us places that are really –prolonged sigh from the woman interviewed– to cry for –short pause– so yes, it is difficult because we were ashamed [...].

I didn't want this life [...] –long pause and voice cracking with feeling– there (in Mexico City) they see us as if we were worth very little because we are very poor at times (Interview. Elena, 43 years old, middle school education unfinished).

It is difficult to convey textually the emotional intensity of the previous fragments, but it exposes a large part of the feelings attached to poverty, such as shame, offense to their dignity, worthlessness, as well as its broad spectrums or depths that are anchored to impoverished conditions and daily struggle in Mexico City.

Although survival strategies continue to maintain a minimum efficiency, the impacts we observe in them are far from being positively valued. Poverty is a form of argument that repeatedly points to processes of loss and erosion of resources. It is a way of naming a complex accumulation that affects their lives with effects that are not yet fully understood, from dignity itself to the most material aspects. In this way, women translate their world and narrate what they face in their daily lives as women and, many of them, as mothers:

We're poor because sometimes we don't even have enough to eat [...], the children don't have enough clothes or, well, and as I said, We're three couples here, even with my dad, but we still live here in my parents' house. Sometimes we don't have enough to eat, we don't have anything to wear or we don't have a job either, and we are down to zero (Interview. Silvia, 42 years old, finished elementary school).

The poverty of these rural women has been linked to local and external processes, conditioned mainly by family dynamics when they chose to migrate and join the informal labor markets in the big cities; however, their labor options have never been broad for their limited initial resources.

The erosion of resources

The women who had migrated worked some months as peasants and other months as migrants, working in informal street activities; their resources were positioned between staple food production, such as those derived from the cornfield and the raising of animals in their home community, with the search for monetary income in order to opt for

something beyond mere subsistence. However, the changes in the dynamics of the resources were not contemplated in a planned manner, considering that labor is the most transformational resource and the one with the greatest presence in families living in poverty (Pizarro, 2001); thus, its timely activation through the labor of children and adolescents would consolidate the modest success of the strategy:

Back when I was a child, the common thing was only to know how to read and write and then go to work far away, hardly anyone stayed in the town, we all left. Gradually we would come back and then we would leave again and then again, that's why it was very difficult to consolidate or achieve something new, because we were always moving around, and in the end, I think it was not worth it. Maybe if we had stayed, it would be something else? (Interview. Juana, 35 years old, studied until fourth grade).

Juana's words refer to an important fact about the disadvantages in the passing of time, where resources must be assessed concerning the dynamic contexts of the people. From the previous paragraph, we can infer that the combination of salaries obtained by the family solvent survival expenses, but do not contemplate plans for the future due to the pressure to survive day to day.

It is important to emphasize that in this gender perspective, family migration for women has a bias that involves parenting, care, domestic and paid work, unlike their male counterparts (husbands, brothers, fathers and others), since, according to the women's testimonies, the younger children are mainly in charge of the mother, while fathers tend to show greater distance from the upbringing and care of the children, and as the children grow up, they gradually gain independence from the mother and are able to develop some remunerated activities such as begging, selling fruit or others.

Moreover, domestic work during migration falls mainly on women (girls, adults and elderly women), while men maintain their condition of working outside the home. In cases where not all family members migrate, the younger children are always left in the care of other women in the family:

My children stayed with me, since they were young, they stayed quiet and helped me as much as they could, so I had them with me because it's always better for them to be close by (Interview. Rebeca, 45 years old, fifth grade of elementary school).

While my children were young and couldn't work, I took care of them. I carried my baby on my back, then two-year-old Romancito sat there or played with something, three-year-old Jorge helped me sometimes because he got bored taking care of his brother [...], and then five-year-old Ana took care of both of them. So, we were cautious there in the city (Interview. Esmeralda, 36 years old, third grade of elementary school).

In this way, productive and reproductive work is present in women's daily lives, causing multiple effects in terms of the time they invest and the fatigue it produces, meaning that their gender condition contributes to their class condition (Moser, 1996).

Another important aspect of poverty as one of the main disadvantages is that poverty is not only economic but also this negative cumulative effect, what Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) would call relational effects or groupings, which is why poverty immobilizes and reduces the possibility of acting in the face of possible needs. Leticia then explains:

We are poor because we don't have money, that's why we migrate, but we have nothing to eat here when we come back. Then, how do we get ahead? But we go there to make a little money and then return here. We can't live there because even though we work there, we have nothing, we pay rent and we buy everything, and here we have a humble little house, but we have no way to earn money. I wish that here we could move forward, but we can't (Interview. Leticia, 44 years old, second grade of elementary school).

The rural poverty manifested in this municipality is conditioned by what women call having nothing or very little and denotes a desolate socioeconomic context when describing its permanence over time and the scarce alternatives to access stable and dignified jobs. Having nothing, or so little, is another way of naming that there are no or very few resources, whether material or optional welfare resources.

The narratives of these women are bound up between need and the search for subsistence, which has led them to make their biographies similar to those of their parents, who saw migration as a survival strategy. However, migration has only led to subsistence

and underlying further exhaustion, with the impression that these women and their families are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. Consequently, poverty is perceived as a hopeless outlook with no way out. There may be several reasons for this; one of them is that families have changed in terms of their needs as their requirements have expanded; another is that the labor markets where they worked are no longer the same and the resources available to the families are no longer as efficient; and the third is that their original environments are increasingly eroded and, therefore, survival at the local level has become more complex.

In all cases, it is not possible to determine precisely what has been said above in this study, but maintaining a multi-causal origin of poverty may be the sum of several options described. The narrative dictates greater climatic difficulties in sowing or achieving good harvests, but also human exhaustion, illness and lack of motivation to continue migrating, as well as a special transgenerational view of poverty from the perspective of when the women were children and adolescents, compared to now as adults and that age begins to be a significant disadvantage.

Social programs as aids for rural women

Another element to consider is given by the relevance of other diversified forms of income beyond wages from family work. In this sense, it is important to consider the monetary and in-kind income provided by federal or state programs.

The ethnography documented the presence of at least four social programs that have contributed in recent years to support the economy of rural women among other sectors of the population: *Prospera* (formerly *progresas* or *oportunidades*), the *65 años y más* program (Part of *Programa para el Bienestar de las Personas Adultas Mayores* nowadays), *Procampo* (*Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo*) and *México Sin Hambre* (Part of *La Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre*).

The four programs provide economic and in-kind inputs that, added to family efforts, are significant for the beneficiaries. However, of these programs, the one that is the most universal is the *65 años y más* program, since the reduced mobility of the elderly

and senior citizens contributes to a better management of the registry and its correct functioning of benefits.

The case of the *Prospera* program deserves a special comment since it is worth remembering that it was suspended from the beginning of the administration headed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and, by October 2021, had not been reactivated. The narratives of the women concerning to this program were that it helped to cover basic needs, but since it was a conditional cash transfer, they were required to live in the communities in a participatory manner, a situation that, under the effects of migration, caused the list of beneficiaries to decrease as they were unable to continue with all the activities or conditional procedures.

The *Procampo* program provides economic support to agricultural producers as an incentive for their production, but according to the people interviewed, the number of beneficiaries is low as a result of the gradual abandonment of agricultural activities due to migration the program's impact is modest in the community.

Finally, the *México Sin Hambre* program operates in this municipality through the community eatery for people in need and students in financial need. In addition, there is a shelter run by the *Instituto Nacional para los Pueblos Indígenas* (National Institute for Indigenous People) for indigenous children and adolescents with limited resources; this shelter receives students from remote communities who require lodging.

Therefore, we will highlight the first two social programs because they have a special focus on mitigating poverty, and their impact on women is more significant. The program *65 años y más* was the most significant for women because their families have elderly people, and the uses they give to the money are for subsistence, medical expenses, and, to a lesser extent, the purchase of clothes, among others. It is a successful program in this municipality thanks to its simplicity and universality:

Despite the modest amount, it does help my mother and grandparents to have a bit of money so that they are not so poor, so they at least have enough to eat [...] My mother uses it almost for herself, for her medical expenses and to buy special food, and if there is any left, it's used for the house (Interview. Ester, 52 years old, no schooling).

This money is important since it's the only help we receive as a family from the government. For my parents, it's double income, and it doesn't matter that it's not much, but of course, it helps us. Besides, the woman in charge of operating the program in the community told us that soon this help would be more, so my parents will have a slightly more to live a better life (Interview. Silvia, 42 years old, finished elementary school).

The *65 años y más* program has been a pillar of the federal government in the discourse against poverty and attention to the poorest. Even with indigenous people, this program operates with an initial age of 65, unlike non-indigenous people, whose initial age is 68. This has been presented as a special policy towards the elderly, but also towards the historical and social inequalities that have been accumulating in indigenous populations.

On the other hand, the *Prospera* program presents operational difficulties in this population since it requires women to live in their communities under the condition of continuous administrative procedures: constant medical check-ups, schooling of their children in basic education, attendance to meetings, and more. All of this has discouraged the beneficiaries who, even at a working age, prefer to migrate to work, claiming that the money they receive from this social program does not compensate for the possible gains from migration.

In addition, *Progresá* links women and their children, which does not always fit with subsistence since they have different needs and the program's regulations oblige them to live in the same community; therefore, cases were documented in which mothers decide to migrate accompanied by their children even at the cost of losing this income.

It's not a lot of money, but we used to buy corn and other things with it. Nevertheless, if we don't fulfill all the procedures, the support is removed, sometimes it cannot be fulfilled and then it takes up to a year for them to return the benefit, so I decided not to apply for it anymore and there are several of us who don't have it. It's difficult because we do need it, but it should change, now they say they've canceled it. I hope they improve it and it can be easier for us as we are poor here (Interview. Leticia, 44 years old, studied up to the second year of elementary school).

With it we buy food, beans, lentils and fruit, especially for my children. It makes us happy to receive the money because it's a useful aid, but it quickly runs out. They once took away my *Progresa* aid because I didn't attend two meetings and they wrote me off. Still, I submitted my papers and after a few months it was back, but they warned me not to leave again because I might not be able to get it back. The bad thing now is that the amount of money is not enough to live on and there is no work here (Interview. Agustina, 29 years old, studied up to the sixth year of elementary school).

The social programs *65 años y más* and *Prospera* represent resources that, together with the rest of the family income, are significant, especially the former. Meanwhile, the latter represents administrative problems for this population, but, at the same time, it was created so women would pay more attention to their health and well-being as well as that of their children, which exemplifies the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. A highly significant element is that migration has been present –for at least 40 years– in the Yucuná population as a consolidated family strategy to mitigate the impacts of poverty, which opposes the *Progresa* guidelines for severely limiting women's mobility.

Final Thoughts

The empirical data show us how poverty is linked to multiple processes of deterioration of resources that imprint biographies of exclusion and precariousness in women's lives. It is important to highlight that women's narratives follow an argumentative thread in which, along with their lives, there are severe disadvantages attached to them. Since childhood, they were incorporated into the labor markets through migration, which causes a generalized abandonment of their school education, and positions them in labor force niches without being able to overcome strict subsistence. Despite this, they consolidated important assets such as the construction of their homes, among others, and that meant achievements of the family group in the face of strong inequalities.

The major point to understand is that, in the face of cumulative disadvantages, collective strategies act as the only way to go, but it does not mean that it is the best. Their

narratives show us that behind it there is plenty of pain, anguish for the future, and personal and emotional crises.

Analytical arguments show that people opt for actions according to their resources and that it is possible that these increasingly deteriorated resources are certainly less effective. This likely is why Santos Reyes Yucuná is considered the poorest municipality in Mexico. However, the present study cannot be conclusive in this last sense, as it does not delve into other aspects such as low productivity of the countryside, lack of water and infrastructure, as well as the inability to generate local jobs (Langlé et al., 2018), all of which are aspects that should be addressed in future works.

Thus, the assessment of the poorest municipality in Mexico has attracted the interest of researchers and agents who seek to have a positive impact on the lives of these women. There is an artisan project with women that is operating in the community and that little by little tries to make its way as a generator of income; in the future it will be important to document the events in the face of such an adverse outlook.

Rural indigenous women, although they have not been able to overcome the initial poverty of when they were children, have managed to support themselves and, at the same time, lead their families and children, take an increasingly important role in their communities and demand better conditions through their participation in public spaces, yet due to limitations it was not possible to delve into these last aspects.

Lastly, concerning social programs as resources to counteract women's poverty, this study found vast differences between "65 años y más" program with a format more conducive to the characteristics of women beneficiaries, emphasizing the direct benefits in support of family and personal economy. However, with the *Prospera* program, the administrative processes and its conditionality sometimes pose insurmountable barriers for women, who, according to Gonzalez, Wodon and Siaens (2007) have already pointed out the low success of these programs since it is very likely that they do not reach or do not adjust to the poorest. These authors argue that the opportunity costs may be higher for women in poorer families than for women in poverty. Thus, the income from these programs is at the minimum threshold for assistance, which will not exceed the

opportunity costs. While women in poverty comply with the requirements to remain in the program, poorer women would have a severe loss that would put survival at risk.

The selected narratives explain a dialogue between survival strategies and how poverty has stalled for decades in women's lives. Poverty entails numerous effects of inequality that eventually cluster and become cumulative disadvantages. What emerges from this situation is that women are getting older and have fewer resources, so it will be important for future research to look at their sons and daughters, who could have greater social capital and, therefore, more possibilities for other resources. However, if the latter does not occur, they could repeat the survival strategy at the cost of migration.

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