



Center for Population Dynamics

School of Social and Family Dynamics
Arizona State University

Tempe, Arizona, 85287-3701, USA www.asu.edu/cepod

CePoD Working Paper # 09-110

The Meanings of Migration, Remittances and Gifts: Views of Honduran Women Who Stay

Sean McKenzie

Cecilia Menjívar

2009

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Arizona State University

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December 2008

Introduction

Modern globalization has brought about a restructuring of resources, jobs, and peoples on a worldwide scale (Bhagwati 2007). And while globalization is a cultural, political, social, and technological phenomenon, its economic impact in understanding international migration is often stressed (Croucher 2004). With few exceptions (Carling 2008; Dreby 2006; Levitt 2001), a particularly overlooked aspect deals with emotional meanings attached to material transfers in the context of international migration. In this paper we examine the non-economic interpretations behind these actions, specifically, the meanings that non-migrants construct. We draw empirically on the case of Honduran non-migrant women's framing of men's economic migration, and bring together analytical tools developed in the area of economic sociology that highlight individuals' interpretations of economic actions (Berezin 2005; Portes 1995; Zelizer 1985; 2005a) and the literature that examines the social underpinnings and emotional meanings of transnational migration (Carling 2008; Dreby 2006; Castellanos 2009; Levitt 2001; Parreñas 2005; Schmalzbauer 2004, 2005; Smith 2006) to address the following question: How do non-migrant women interpret men's migration—what meaning to they attach to gifts, money, debts, and the communication through which they remain in touch with migrant men during periods of migration-induced separation?¹

Scholars have examined different aspects of family separation resulting from migration (Guarnizo 1998; Mahler 2001; Menjívar 2006a, 2006b; Schmalzbauer 2004, 2005). Like most migration-focused studies, this work has tended to concentrate on those who migrate (Massey, Goldring and Durand 1994; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). Yet the family members left behind experience some of the most intense effects of migration—not only financially but also socially and emotionally. For many children migration means growing up without one or both

parents, while for some families the outcome of a member's migration can lead to dissolution (see Parreñas 2005). Women are likely to assume much of the workload, though not always status and power (Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007) when their migrant husbands or elder sons leave. Given their centrality in the families left behind, it might be argued that women's interpretations also shape the meanings migration has for other family members, including the children. Thus women's views are especially critical to understanding how migration is interpreted and how it affects non-migrant family members.²

In this paper we examine the meanings that men's migration has for the wives and mothers who stay in two rural communities in the department of Intibucá, Honduras. We include the views of mothers and wives in the analysis because these women share many of the same views and concerns, and note only when applicable any differences between the two. Whereas the men's migration (and its consequences) can be couched entirely in economic terms and the whole enterprise be assessed using economic indicators (e.g., amount of remittances sent, their use in production or consumption, money spent in telephone communication, size of debts, etc.) these ostensibly economic pursuits, outcomes, and consequences acquire significant emotional meaning for those involved. Debts incurred to make the journey and remittances of money and gifts are intricately linked to regular communication during the time of separation, and all bound in meaning and emotion for all involved. And while our examination focuses on activities in the context of transnational migration, it might shed light more generally on the links between emotions and social action (see Berezin 2005).

Through interviews with non-migrant mothers and wives and qualitative field work in two Honduran rural towns, we find that women's interpretations of men's migration are not simple, black-and-white assessments. Instead, these are multifaceted views that do not remain

static over time and reflect a complex set of factors in the communities where women stay (but also in the context in which their husbands and sons work). We identify three areas that helped us to discern what the men's migration meant for the women: communication between the non-migrant women and migrant husbands and sons, stress and anxiety in their personal lives, and added household responsibilities. After a brief summary of the literature that informs our analytical framework, we summarize our methods and data and then move on to our main empirical observations.

The Conceptual Lens

We cull a lens that brings into dialogue literatures on economic sociology and on the social meanings of relations within transnational families. This approach permits us to highlight the different angles of the question we address and positions our empirical case of women in Honduras to make a broader contribution to other bodies of work as well.

Transnational Families and the Women Who Stay. Scholars who focus on the dynamics of transnational families have highlighted important social underpinnings and consequences of transnational activities, particularly the “social remittances” that flow between migrants and non-migrants (Levitt 2001), and bringing analytically under this concept those who migrate, those who do not migrate and receive support from migrants, and those who stay behind and do not receive such support (Levitt and Sørensen 2004). Attention also has been given to “modes of materializing the family as an imagined community with shared feelings and obligations” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 14). And although those who stay are not merely passive recipients (Van Hear 2002), important power asymmetries between migrants and those who stay have been found (Carling 2008; Mahler 2001; Menjívar and Agajdanian 2007; Schmalzbauer 2008), though not always in the direction of the migrants (Carling 2008). In the Honduran case, Schmalzbauer

(2005) notes that networks play a key role in maintaining families left behind, with a significant cross-border division of labor in which productive activities occur in the host country and reproductive ones take place back home (Schmalzbauer 2004).

A growing body of literature, some within the context of transnational migration, examines the effects of migration-induced separation on women who stay. This research has highlighted the increased autonomy, self-efficiency, and decision-making capacity of women whose husbands have migrated, an observation that has been made about different groups and geographical areas (Gulati 1992; Hadi 2001; Khaled 1995; Parreñas 2005; Pribilsky 2004; Reeder 2001). Other studies also highlight a shift in gender roles after men migrate, but point to a more nuanced, less clear-cut shift (Bever 2002). Aysa and Massey (2004) observed that Mexican men's migration could push wives into the labor market, but this is more likely in urban settings where there are more job opportunities than in rural areas. And Salgado de Snyder (1993) noted that among Mexican women who are left behind newly assumed responsibilities did empower some, but also exposed the women to a great deal of stress because these shifting roles conflicted with traditional beliefs about women in a male-dominated society. Similarly, in a comparative study of wives left behind in Guatemala and Armenia, Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) found that male migration strengthened gender inequality and perpetuated female dependence. Importantly, these latter studies stress the importance of understanding the social milieu in which non-migrant women fashion their assessments of the men's migration.

Economic Sociology. Alejandro Portes (1995) remarked that sociological studies of immigration bear directly on theoretical developments in economic sociology because they provide rare empirical opportunities to refine concepts and generate hypotheses that are central to this area. Migratory processes, in his view, provide what Robert Merton called a "strategic

research site,” that is, “an area where processes of more general import are manifested with unusual clarity” (1995: 2). It is in this light that we borrow from the conceptual toolkit that economic sociology offers to examine the non-economic aspects of Honduran men’s migration and associated actions and consequences, such as communication, debts, and remittances, and how the women make sense of these migration-induced actions. A focus on the emotions surrounding men’s economic migration and the meanings women attach to it allow us to pinpoint the fundamentally social structures that shape the form and outcomes of economic action. Not only are economic activities embedded in social action, but as Viviana Zelizer observed, “plenty of economic activity goes into creating, defining, and sustaining social ties” (2005: 2).

We would like to underscore that in using economic sociology’s analytical tools, we do not try to portray a “purely” market sphere (with an emphasis on production and distribution) separate from meaning and sentiment. Instead, we follow Zelizer’s (2005a, 2005b) “Crossroads” approach to identify the multiple and complex social processes and their economic components, a standpoint that allows us to examine meaning and emotions in the material interactions between the migrant men and non-migrant women. We also find useful Biggart and Castanias’ (2001) characterization of the *interplay* (not parallels or tension) between economic transactions and social relations. Thus, we follow Biggart and Castanias’ (2001) and Swedberg (2003) to note that emotions should not be seen as conflicting with economic exchanges, as impediments or as disturbing exchanges, but rather as an integral part of economic action.

Background

While researchers have devoted significant time and effort to studying migration from other Latin American countries, much less is known about Honduran migration. The Honduran population currently stands at 7.6 million people and the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)

estimates that 480,000 of its citizens reside outside Honduran borders; the vast majority in the United States (2006). U.S.-bound Honduran migration dates back to the movement of workers in carriers transporting bananas to Louisiana ports (New Orleans) before refrigeration was used in shipping fresh foods during the late 19th and early 20th century (Euraque 1996). Throughout the 20th Century Honduran workers and exiles continued to migrate to the United States, and today many Honduran migrants make the U.S-bound journey by land (and without a visa), often undertaking harrowing trips (Sládková 2007). In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch, a category five storm that devastated the country, opened a new chapter in Honduran migration. More than 1.5 million suffered serious damage to their property thus sparking the largest emigration in the country's history (Government of Honduras 2001).

The Honduran government estimates that the percentage of rural households living in poverty jumped from 69.2% before the hurricane to 74.6% in Mitch's aftermath (Government of Honduras 2001). In response to the damage wrought by the hurricane, on December 30, 1998 the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—renewable temporary protection from deportation for up to 18 months—to Hondurans who had entered the country before that date (Kugler and Yuskel, 2006). Living conditions a decade later, though improved since Mitch's devastation, are still among the poorest in Latin America, and the military coup d'état that took place in June 2009 might further exacerbate conditions that lead to increased emigration. The INE estimates that 20% of Honduran households now receive monetary remittances, with the volume increasing every year. In 2007 remittances were estimated at 2.5 billion dollars; in 2008 they had increased to 2.7 billion. And whereas in 2000 remittances accounted for 6.8% of the country's GDP, in 2006 they had grown to 25.5% (Banco Central de Honduras 2007).

The two neighboring rural communities in the department of Intibucá where we collected our data have populations of around 500 persons each. The nearest city to these communities is the Intibucan capital, La Esperanza, with a population of around 7,000, according to local estimates. For the villagers, La Esperanza is a two-hour bus ride costing roughly two dollars round trip on an unpaved road down a mountainside. Most people make the trip into La Esperanza once a week to buy clothes, home repair items, and food products. As migration to the United States from towns and villages surrounding La Esperanza has increased, many villagers have included retrieving remittances at one of the two local banks to their list errands during their weekly trips to La Esperanza.

Methods and Data

Data for this paper came from 18 in-depth, semi-structured focal interviews conducted in two rural communities in the Honduran department of Intibucá in December 2007 and January 2008. We conducted nine interviews with wives or partners of male migrants and six with mothers of male migrants. To obtain a rounded perspective, we spoke with other family members and interviewed a father of a male migrant, a son of migrant parents, and a husband who had returned. These three men were working or had previously worked in the United States.

In addition to the focal in-depth interviews, the first author spent time with many families in the two communities where the interviews were conducted. The first author had worked in the communities before and knew the area well when he returned to conduct interviews. In this recent visit, the first author stayed in one of the communities for four weeks with a family with whom he had lived previously and in which the father/husband had migrated. This familiarity and long-term contact with the community allowed him to converse with many more individuals than those interviewed formally. Indeed, the focal interviews, covering a variety of exploratory

questions that touched on work, family, marriage, and views of the future, provided a window into the themes discussed with many other community residents, eventually evolving into the three dimensions of non-migrant women's lives we expand on in this study. The interviews and fieldwork for this study are not representative of all rural families in Honduras, much less of all Hondurans with male relatives in the United States.³ However, our methods permitted us to grasp meanings that individuals attribute to their actions and behaviors. And even though we did not follow strict randomization procedures to access our study participants, we took care to reach them through multiple points of contact. Thus, our study participants come from a variety of family make-up, ages, and levels of education; the age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 70, their education level varied from zero years of formal schooling to the 9th grade (the majority of respondents had completed up to sixth grade), and the number of children per family member interviewed ranged from two to eight.⁴ On average, the women had been separated from the men two years, and many of the women in both communities were in consensual unions. According to Dev Vos (2000), as of 1970 54% of all unions in Honduras were informal. Thus, consensual unions are not an exception in this context and Hondurans usually treat them as formal unions. Also, many of those interviewed (or with whom we conversed informally) had family members other than husbands or sons who had migrated, generally brothers and cousins. All but one of our study participants' families owned some land and relied on agriculture to produce food for consumption. And even as our study participants' families received remittances, agriculture continued to be a major source of income. As migration to the United States is an ever-present reality for many Hondurans, informal conversations with neighbors, teachers, business owners, and friends of friends, as well as field observations, complemented the information gathered through the formal interviews.

Women's Interpretations and Meanings of Migration

In the time following the migration of their husbands or children, women's lives change significantly on a number of levels. At a personal level, they often deal with the stress and anxiety the departure of a husband or son can bring (de Snyder 1993). And in the home or in family, they frequently take on the responsibilities of which their husband or sons were in charge (de Snyder 1993; Hadi 2001). We focus on how our study participants interpreted the migration of their loved ones and the meanings this "economic migration" had for them in areas we identified after initial conversations in the field. Such meanings and interpretations are shaped by a complex set of factors, a point that underscores a fundamental aspect of the Honduran women's views: economic activities, such as remittances and the labor migration itself, are embedded in social structures made up of interpersonal networks and are not the result of individuals acting alone (Swedberg and Granovetter 2001: 11) and therefore are not carried out or interpreted in the same fashion by everyone or in all the contexts in which they take place.

As several studies point out, economic opportunities strongly motivate individuals to migrate (Borjas, 1989, 1999; Hatton and Williamson 1998; Winter-Ebmer 1994). Thus, it stands to reason that those left behind would interpret migration as closely tied to the economic reasons for the migration in the first place. And the migrant husbands or sons who have stable, adequate paying jobs in the United States can make significant contributions, mainly through remittances, to the well-being of their families in Honduras (La Red de Desarrollo Sostenible de Honduras 2007). Women who received enough money to build a new home—which many respondents interpreted as the ultimate indicator of their migrant husband or son's success—generally viewed migration as worth the hardships and sociopsychological costs of separation. They viewed remittances as a way to improve their family's diet, purchase new clothes, and pay for their

children's schooling. However, purchases and expenditures meant much more than using remittances in production or consumption. For Ambrosia, a 70 year-old woman and mother of three sons working in the United States, the meaning of her sons' remittances went beyond the purely economic. As was the case for the majority of the women in the study, Ambrosia's sons' migration did not translate solely into home repair or more money for the household to spend; those home repairs and extra finances meant love, commitment and sacrifice, meanings intimately linked to the social milieu in which they are formed. As Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) would note, individuals "relativize" relations with family members through these exchanges, and as Viviana Zelizer (2005a) has observed, people use economic transactions to reproduce and differentiate their intimate relations, and consumption helps individuals to organize their social lives as well (Zelizer 2005b: 340).

However, many of the same women who mentioned benefiting financially from remittances said they wished their husbands and sons had not migrated. The apparent contradiction between the financial success of some migrants and the non-migrant women's interpretations seemed curious because virtually every woman with whom we spoke stated that improving their family's economic situation was the primary motivation for their husband's or son's migration. This apparent incongruity, we reasoned, deserved exploration; it underscored other, beyond purely economic, factors in the women's interpretations. The words of Jasmín, the wife of a migrant and mother of four young boys, exemplify the complex interpretations and multiple meanings women attach to the men's migration, "Well, he says that he loves them a lot, the children, but I don't know. My thought is that he doesn't [love the boys] because he wouldn't have left them [if he did]. Because I'll start to talk with him sometimes, and I say, 'And you think that money is happiness?'" In her assessment of her husband's migration, Jasmín

underscores the intimate aspects involved in her partner's "economic" migration.

Like Jasmín, other women interpreted receiving money or gift packages from their husbands and sons abroad through more than a financial lens. Julieta, the wife of a migrant and mother of three children, joyfully recounted her feelings when she receives a gift package, generally containing clothes or photos, from her husband: "I feel happy. I feel really emotional. Because when he sends me packages, I don't know what it is he has sent. And I open it...and...I've even cried. They're truly beautiful things." Importantly for the women, gifts and remittances were tangible reminders that their husbands and sons had not forgotten them.⁵

Rafaela, the wife of a migrant and mother of three boys, wistfully echoes this sentiment, "He's sent us three packages... clothes for the kids, toys... things that we don't have here that we use, for the kitchen...or tools. One becomes happy because...you know. One's thoughts tell you that you've been forgotten. But if he sends you money or things, you know he hasn't forgotten you. You feel good. Of course I feel happy when he sends me things." Thus, remittances and gifts seemed to minimize, in the mothers' eyes, the potential for family breakdown or abandonment, or of separation or union dissolution among the wives (see Zelizer 2005), which were significant concerns the women had.

We identify three dimensions of the women's lives that proved useful in grasping the meanings migration and its derivatives held for them. Each of these areas is also related to spheres of life that have been examined in the context of transnational migration more generally. We focus on the form and content of communication during the time they lived separated from the men, which had special meaning for the non-migrant women; the presence of stress and anxiety, as despite remittances and gifts, this is what the men's migration has meant for many women; and from the women's perspectives, the additional responsibilities they assume after the

men's migration, as this represents another concrete expression of what the men's migration has signified in their lives. Communication between the male migrants and the non-migrant women occupied a unique, multifaceted role: While significant in and of itself, it also served as a lens into different aspects of the women's lives and also worked as a conditioning factor to shape other spheres. Communication also helps us to discern the fundamentally social activity that shapes meanings attached to migration. Given its central place, we discuss communication first.

A Lens Into to the Lives of Non-Migrant Women: Communication

Telephone (and other forms of high tech) communication between migrants and non-migrant relatives, it has been argued, ameliorates the effects of migration, contributing to build ties across borders (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1995; Mahler 2001) Indeed, Foner (1997), notes that activities that we now call transnational also existed among migrants a century ago, and what is new are the improvements in travel and communication technology that allow more frequent and regular contact between the migrants and their homelands. Portes *et al.* (1999: 219) echo this view and observe that, "it is the intensity of exchanges, the new modes of transacting, and the multiplication of activities that constitute a unique phenomenon among immigrants today." Similarly, the Honduran women in this study and their migrant husbands and sons benefited greatly from the technological developments of the last several years. The cellular phone, in particular, has changed the communication landscape for these migrants and non-migrants. In 2003, while visiting the two towns where fieldwork took place, the first author did not see a single cellular phone. Four years later, in 2007, increased availability and affordability had made cellular phones a common appendage to most villagers.

Just four years earlier, the sole option to maintain contact with a migrant husband or son was to take a two hour bus-ride at a cost of around \$3.50 to La Esperanza, the departmental

capital, to use a telephone (mostly to receive a previously-scheduled phone call). It is now possible for families to make and receive calls from their homes. The \$3.50 bus fare can now be spent on an international calling card, good for a 15 minute phone call to the United States. It should be noted, however, that due to the greater access to technology and its lower costs in the United States (see Mahler 2001; Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007), migrant husbands and sons nearly always initiated telephone contact with their wives and mothers in Honduras. Thus, even though almost all the women interviewed owned at least one cell phone, usually only in exceptional circumstances or during a crisis, did women initiate contact with their husbands or sons in the United States. As Teresa, the wife of a migrant and mother of five, put it, “It costs money [to call]. Because the [calling] card is expensive... You have to wait until he calls. And yes, one can call because of some sickness or something like that.” This differential access to communication technology exposes important asymmetries of power in the context of transnational ties that exacerbate gender inequalities.

In terms of frequency of communication, the women reported talking with their husbands and sons in the United States anywhere from once per day to every few months, but the majority talked with their loved ones weekly. Most conversations ran under 15 minutes in length, though a few women talked for more than one hour. Regarding content, most women mentioned speaking with their husbands and sons about external goings-on rather than about their own thoughts and feelings. The first author often overheard, and interviewees typically related, conversations regarding day-to-day chores and responsibilities, such as household maintenance and land care, as well as financial matters. The first author rarely heard, and women almost never reported, conversations broaching issues such as fear, loneliness, and stress, which were always present in the women’s lives.

Thus, communication in itself was significant in understanding how women interpreted migration. Many preferred to talk about their conversations with their loved ones abroad rather than about their own experiences at home. Instead of trying to re-direct the women's talk to converse about their own experiences, we found it more effective to obtain this information via their retelling of conversations with loved ones abroad. Accordingly, women often framed the other dimensions of their lives we examine here in the context of conversations with their husbands and sons abroad, which worked as a lens that allowed us to gain insight into their personal, household, and social lives. Thus, the retelling of conversations allowed us a glimpse into the intimate sphere of stress and anxiety the women felt in the absence of their husbands and sons, how their lives in the home had changed and, ultimately, the meaning they constructed around the economic aspects of the men's migration.

Doris, a 35 year-old mother of two, recounted to the first author how during a conversation with her husband she addressed the anxiety of potentially having been forgotten, feelings that were common among other women as well: "We talked about that he doesn't want to be alone anymore in the United States...because I told him, 'Manuel, what do you think of me? You're already going to have forgotten me...there's not going to be anymore love between us?' and he said, 'Of course, Doris. I've thought that in January you come here to stay with me.'" The retelling of conversations also allowed us a glimpse into what the men's migration has meant for the households. Through recounting telephone conversations, the women explained responsibilities they had assumed since their husband's or son's migration. Carolina, a housewife and mother of two in her mid twenties, explains: "...Because I'd say to Francisco, 'and me? How am I going to manage all the work, the children, too...what am I going to do?' I'd start to cry."

Communication Affecting Women's Interpretations of Migration

Aside from providing us with a lens into various spheres of the women's lives, we found that communication between the women and their migrant husbands and sons was in itself a significant factor in shaping how the women interpreted the migration of their loved ones.

Thus, communication meant more than simply receiving a telephone call with information about their loved ones, which the women often longed for. Akin to the remittances and gift packages, women interpreted telephone calls as an indicator that their husbands or sons still loved them. Laura explained that regular communication meant emotional comfort, "Every time I talk with [my husband] I start crying. When I hear his voice he tells me, "Yes, I love you. I love you." Luisa, an outspoken wife of a migrant, recounted scolding her husband over the phone for not calling often enough, resentfully asking, "Have you forgotten you have children and a wife in Honduras?" Similarly, Carmen, a mother of five whose eldest son is in the United States, jumped to the conclusion that her son had forgotten her before considering other possibilities such as detention or deportation after not hearing from him for some time: "Sadly, the one who's there has forgotten me. He doesn't call me. It's been three months... At the beginning he always used to call me and send me money. But not anymore." Indeed, along with remittances and packages, women interpreted regular telephone communication as the strongest reassurance that their family would remain intact through their period of separation. Carmen, now with tears welling in her eyes and her voice quivering, continued, "I feel sad because, you know that... as a mother, one always lives waiting for her children... to come home."

The importance of communication in women's interpretations of migration is further illuminated by Jovito, a 42 year-old farmer and father who had recently returned from two years working in the United States. His words, from the men's perspective, also highlight the emotions attached to remittances and money, "If I am there, and for whatever reason I don't have any

money, I don't have work, but I communicate with my family, with my wife, she is going to understand me, and so we'll find some way to fix the situation. But if I don't have communication, even if I were to have money over there [in US], what about the family? They are not remembered [without communication].” Toña, in her mid fifties and an active and well-respected woman in the community, stressed the importance of communication in more stark terms: “It happens in the community. There are families that have disintegrated...if there isn't communication.” From the perspective of the women, regular communication with their husbands or sons represented a good gauge of how strong their relationship was, and it exemplified the non-economic meanings of the men's economic migration, the emotional ties that were central to monetary and material transactions. Overall, we found that communication, along with remittances and gifts, represented a significant factor in how women interpreted migration, either alleviating or aggravating (in the absence of communication) the stress and anxiety revolving around the possibility of abandonment or family dissolution.

Personal-Level Meanings: Stress and Anxiety

For many Honduran women the migration of a husband or son meant the addition of stress, which could be expected. However, we do not argue that stress and anxiety simply *resulted* from the men's migration; when explaining the meaning of men's migration, the women spoke of stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Thus, we found stress and anxiety to be an important dimension for understanding how women construe their loved ones' migrations.

Often, women spoke of migration in nuanced terms, noting the benefits but also perceiving loneliness, worrying for their own safety and that of their men. Paralleling Snyder's (1993) research, we noticed that worry over family dissolution was among the chief sources of stress for the non-migrant women in Honduras, which was linked to the potential for

abandonment among the mothers, or of family dissolution among the wives. As Ofelia, the wife of a labor migrant in her mid-thirties, declared, "...what I want is that [my husband] not forget his children, so that he always sends [money] so that his children continue forward." Men's migration had also translated into loneliness for the women, which also triggered stress and anxiety. Reyna, a young mother of two girls whose husband had been working in the United States for two years, described her feelings about her husband's absence as follows: "Me, alone here...sometimes I felt really sad. So I'd go and sit down on the bench outside, and I just stared... there's nothing to do...and from that, I became, like, stressed, just being here in the house all day...but yes, I felt bad." Moreover, concern for the well-being of loved ones abroad and their own personal safety in the absence of a husband or son frequently precipitated stress and anxiety. As Juana, the wife of a migrant and young mother who now lives alone with her three small children affirmed after recounting an attempt by a stranger to break into her home, "...I feel less safe. I feel more scared...because I can't protect myself if something happens."

For the women stress and anxiety sometimes manifested physically through illnesses. This was the case during particularly taxing periods in the men's migration process, above all during the men's dangerous journey to the United States, when information about them was often scarce. Norma, a woman in her early sixties and mother of two migrant sons recounted, "I even got sick. My nerves were terrible, so that it was impossible to be calm. I just passed the time crying, crying. Because I listened to the news—of the murders, people falling from the train, the gang hold-ups...All of that." Notably, a husbands' migration did not mean more stress for all women. In one case, a forty year-old mother of five whose husband was in the United States said she felt less stress now that her spouse was gone, despite her increased workload, because she did not have to deal with his drinking problem. She claimed he had reduced his drinking in the

United States, in part due to the heavy demands of his work and out of fear of deportation.

Importantly, in spite of the women's anxious words or expressions of relief at the absence of their husbands or sons, they seldom painted a black-and-white picture of their loved ones' migration, even in the same conversation. As Smelser (1998: 5) observed, ambivalence is more characteristic of how individuals experience social life than certainty. The majority of the women who expressed anxiety or fear qualified their assessments by asserting that their husband's or son's migration had been a good decision. Noteworthy, their interpretations and assessments were not static over time. As the following quote from Dominga, a woman in her early thirties, illustrates, levels of stress and anxiety shifted over time, and thus, perceptions of the men's migration changed accordingly. In her words: "I was alright with him leaving. But now with him being gone for three years, don't think that I'm well. In these three years since he left I don't feel well. I feel alone and...It's as if he doesn't love me because he went away for so long... I don't know what's going to happen but I don't think I'm going to be able to bear another three more years without him." As Dominga's words indicate, the meanings women attach to men's migration evolved over the period of their loved ones' absence, with some factors gaining importance at times while others (including receiving money) diminishing in relevance.

Household-Level Change: Additional Responsibilities

For many of the mothers and wives left in Honduras the men's migration translated into additional responsibilities in the home, but often not of their own choosing (see also de Snyder, 1993; Hadi 2001). In some instances, as with raising children, women devote more time and energy to tasks previously shared with another person (Gulati 1983) and as a result engage in what Hays (1996) calls "intensive mothering," that is, spending a substantial amount of time, energy, and (remitted) money in raising children. In other cases women assume altogether new

responsibilities, such as those previously managed by husbands and sons, including agricultural labor (Khafagy 1982). And while some researchers have noted that assuming new responsibilities is empowering for women left behind (see section above), others observe that when this happens by default and not by choice it leads to stress for the women (de Snyder 1993). We found that in the eyes of the Honduran women in our study, men's migration meant more work, stress, and anxiety as a result of additional responsibilities. In turn, the added responsibilities and stress shaped their views of the men's migration, even when they received remittances, gifts, and were in regular communication with the migrant men.

Though some women maintained that their responsibilities after the men's migration had remained the same, most interpreted men's migration in terms of increased responsibilities. And while a few women found additional responsibilities liberating and a source of newfound self-confidence, the majority viewed the men's migration as increased responsibilities that they had no choice but to assume. In their constructions they interspersed the positive perceptions that come from improved material conditions with the less optimistic assessments of their increased burdens. María, a mother of two young children in her mid-twenties, compared her life before and after her husband's migration; her words embody the sentiments of other women with whom we conversed: "...we had our problems with money, but now I don't feel as calm as I did when he was here... without that person, life is really difficult here, because one person has to do everything..." Overall, the non-migrant women infused their views with emotional meaning that were not so neatly separated from the money and goods they received, and almost all offered a nuanced answer that was far from an unambiguous assessment.

With regard added responsibilities after the men's migration there was an important difference between the views of wives and mothers: the added responsibilities seem to weigh

much heavier on wives than on mothers, an assessment based on gender role expectations of work in the home for men and women. Estela, a wife and mother of five in her mid-thirties put it this way, “The work is double. Because you have to be looking out for the work of the land and the work here in the home...Before, I never worked. And today I have to work...in the coffee field. You have to be taking care of it, fertilizing it, harvesting the coffee. And you have to plant corn, plant beans...and make sure it comes out good.” Indeed, for many of the women, agricultural work, more than an additional responsibility, was a new job, and one they were careful of doing very well because the products of this work became an indicator of how well the family did financially as a result of the men’s migration. Ana, a wife and mother of four in her mid-forties, described the numerous tasks associated with administering a piece of crop-yielding land: “...before, I didn’t go to the coffee field, like during the harvesting of the coffee. I didn’t go...rather [my husband] was in charge of finding people and taking them to harvest the coffee. He kept all the work records and at the end, on the weekend, he had the work records all ready to be able to pay the people who helped him. Now it’s different. Now I have to look for a car, I have to look for people. Then after, bring the harvested coffee to the house to grind the coffee and keep my records up-to-date to be able to pay the workers. So I have to be paying attention to whether or not the work the helpers are doing is good enough.”

As they talked what the men’s migration had meant in their lives, the women frequently mentioned a greater workload within the household, especially concerning childcare, and assuming an increased role in financial decision-making.⁶ Thus, a number of women said they had started to view themselves as both mother and father. Even more significant for the women, they also talked about their new responsibility as managers of the debt almost all the migrant husbands and sons had incurred in order to pay for their trips north. The managing of this debt

was an important migration-related development in the women's lives that exposed the intricate links between monetary transactions, emotions, and the social foundations of transnational migration. In the Honduran case we examine, informal social relations affect and are affected by the debts the men incur in order to migrate north. The women's experiences bring to light the social underpinnings of debt but also the intersection of debt, money, and gender. The women mentioned that their husbands or sons had left for the United States with the assistance of a *coyote* (smuggler), at a fee typically around \$5,000 dollars. In almost every case, an associate of the coyote loaned the men the money for the journey, typically at a high interest rate (10% was common). This is a large sum of money that takes a long time to repay and brings additional complications to the lives of the migrants and the women who stay. Suyapa, in her early forties and a mother of five, described how payment of the debt lengthened her husband's intended stay abroad: "Manuel tells me he expects to be in the United States for six years...because right now it's been three years and he still owes half of the money he borrowed."

Although male migrants were responsible for earning the money to repay their loans through employment in the United States, their wives and mothers at home effectively assumed the role of managers, dealing with debt collectors and the looming threat of having their family's land—and sometimes home—seized as collateral for failure to pay on time. As one Honduran wife dealing with her husband's debt explained, "We have our coffee fields...we have them mortgaged so that [my husband] could go. So if we don't accelerate our payments we lose the land." And Rosa described an interaction in which a debt collector intimidated her: "The lady [who loaned us the money] always sends her husband to the house to ask, 'What's happening with the money?' Last year he came and asked me, 'What do you think about your husband? Are you going to pressure him to pay the money, or are we going to have to take away your land?'"

And Concha, in her late twenties, related another experience of managing a migration-induced debt with elevated interest: “All that money he [her partner] paid the coyote should have been for us, here.” It was precisely through managing these debts that women viewed their husbands’ or sons’ migration in vain because paying off the debt had constrained the family’s ability to reap the tangible benefits that remittances could bring. And these debts also had increased women’s visibility as the managers of the household finances, a role they did not always welcome. In the social context in which the women lived, everyone knew what everyone else did with money received. As one migrant’s wife exasperatedly declared, “When Enrique left, the first thing he told me was that he was going to fix the house, like construct a new kitchen and an additional room for the children...but we haven’t seen any of that, because it’s very little money after we pay the [debt] so we don’t have enough to undertake those projects.” Thus, for the non-migrant women debts that sons and husbands had acquired took on social and emotional significance that became difficult to separate from the money itself and ultimately from the men’s migration.

Discussion and Concluding Points

In this paper we have examined how Honduran women interpret the U.S-bound migration of their husbands and sons, and how they attach meanings to transfers of money, gifts, debts, and to the communication through which they remain connected. Three dimensions helped us to examine what this migration has meant in the women’s lives: communication, the intimate level of stress and anxiety, and added responsibilities in the household and family. These are not simply consequences of the men’s migration; in the women’s eyes, these areas provide concrete examples of what the migration of husbands and sons has meant for them and present grounds to evaluate the men’s migration in their lives.

Telephone communication was an important angle that permitted us to gauge women’s

views, which in turn influenced women's interpretations. During semi-structured interviews and conversations women recounted their own experiences via retelling telephone conversations they had with their migrant husbands and sons, giving us a multi-level view into their lives by connecting the personal and household spheres. As well, as abandonment and family dissolution loomed in the horizon for mothers and wives, regular communication worked to comfort them, alleviating stress and anxieties revolving around the possibility that they had been forgotten. Indeed, on a personal level, the most significant sources of stress for the women centered on concerns about family dissolution, the health and safety of the men abroad, and loneliness. Thus, many women came to associate the men's "economic" migration with elevated levels of tension, even when they received money and gifts. And receiving a gift, money, or a telephone call tended to soothe their anxiety, which led to nuanced interpretations of the men's migration.

And while added responsibilities for the women often were expansions of previous duties, including child-raising, others were altogether new tasks, such as supervising agricultural production and managing the debt the men had incurred. Thus, for many women the men's migration signified added responsibilities and financial decision-making, which for some meant a measure of self-confidence and feelings of independence. And while additional responsibilities in agricultural supervision perhaps gave some women an opportunity to get out of the house, this freedom was not the type they seemed to want. Thus, in this social milieu, added responsibilities were interpreted as a burden the women were obligated to assume. As others have noted (Aysa and Massey 2004; Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007; Salgado de Snyder 1993), the social milieu in which the women live shapes the lens through which they construe the men's migration.

The Honduran women in this study viewed the men's migration in various, sometimes seemingly contradictory, ways. Whereas many, including the migrant men, almost exclusively

interpreted the success or failure of migration in economic terms was (e.g., increased remittances, debt reduction, etc.) such assessments conveyed important social meanings, including respect and love and deference from family and community members. And although economic assessments weighed heavily for the women, their interpretations of the men's migration infused such considerations with emotion and meaning. Equally if not more significant for the women were regular phone calls, which added meaning to the remittances of money and gifts, and also translated into concrete reassurances that they were still loved. Thus, even in situations where the financial situation of the family had improved a great deal as a result of a husband's or son's migration, the non-migrant women viewed such economic matters from a non-monetary angle that added new meaning to the men's migration.

The women's interpretations of the remittances and gifts sent, the managing of the debts, and the telephone conversations with the men allow us to discern the non-economic aspects, the social and emotional meanings, of these material transfers. Key to the point we make and following scholarship from economic sociology (Swedberg 2003; Zelizer 2005a, 2005b), the non-economic, emotional milieu does not constitute a separate sphere from economic exchanges. Indeed, through the economic and material exchanges, in the words of Zelizer (2005b), people "fashion and refashion meaningful social relations." For those involved in these transactions there is no clear-cut separation between a world of rationality and impersonality and one of emotion, intimacy and love. For the Honduran women in our study, the money and gifts their husbands and sons sent meant much more than home repairs and investment; they *also* meant expressions of love and conveyed an assurance that they had not been forgotten.

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Endnotes

¹ We are aware that scholars from other research traditions, certainly anthropology and history, have examined the social meanings of money and of economic transactions. However, in our work we borrow from the analytical toolkit of economic sociology. Scholars in this area already have noted the overlapping conceptual spaces between migration and economic sociology (see Portes 1995)

² Women migrate in large numbers; in some cases, they equal or surpass men (Morrison, Schiff, Sjoblom 2007).

³ As well, we do not pretend that these interviews are inclusive of the ethno-racial (and class) heterogeneity of Honduras, as our data encompass only a slice, albeit one magnified with the aid of our in-depth research methods, of the rich social mosaic of the country.

⁴ All the names we used are pseudonyms.

⁵ Offer (1997) observes that individuals desire regard and approval and gifts express regard; thus, the “gift relationship” highlights the social significance of regard.

⁶ This is what scholars have equated with empowerment. However, from the point of view of the Honduran women in this study, assuming financial decision-making responsibilities did not always translate into empowerment or even a positive development. Others in their families and communities watched closely how the women’s movements and how they spent the money received in remittances. Thus, it became an indicator of the success of the men’s migration and of the women’s own dedication to their children and household.