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Men's Migration and Women's Lives: Views from Rural Armenia and Guatemala*

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study seeks to comparatively assess the consequences of men's migration for gender roles and relations in Armenia and Guatemala. Methods. We use 29 in-depth interviews conducted with women in Guatemala and 27 interviews conducted in Armenia, complemented with field observations. Results. Men's migration exerts diverse effects on their wives' lives, and these effects are mediated by the sociocultural milieu in which the women live and by the context in which the men generate incomes. As other studies, we find that women take on added responsibilities when their partners migrate for work, but unlike most of the literature, our data do not show that these new responsibilities significantly transform women's status and relationships. Conclusions On balance, the division of labor established through the husbands' migration further reinforces gender inequality. Men's role as breadwinners and primary decision-makers is further strengthened, as is women's subordinate position in the household.

INTRODUCTION

Tangible indicators of globalization include population movements and their twin development, the entry of individuals from all corners of the world into new work arrangements and labor regimes. Since family members rarely migrate together, migration has usually involved the separation, though not always fragmentation, of families. And although “binational” or “transnational” families have existed in different historical periods, today such families live in a world that has been compressed by modern technology and advances in travel, allowing families to remain connected while physically separated. As Fass (2005: 942) notes, “globalization has not only made migration more possible, but has affected the family decisions that frame migration.” While substantial attention has been paid to the migrants themselves, our understanding of globalization and its effects on local lives is considerably enhanced when we look at how migration affects not only those family members who migrate, but also those who stay. As such, whereas global processes affect workers and their families the world over, an examination across different geographic and cultural contexts could highlight important patterns of how such global trends are played out locally. In this study we seek to “territorialize” globalizing forces by comparing the experiences of the non-migrating female partners of male labor migrants in two different sociocultural terrains.

Our study focuses on rural women in Armenia, a country of 3.5 million in the Caucasus, and Guatemala, a Central American nation of 14 million. Seemingly two very distinct settings located half a world apart, on close inspection they share important migration-related characteristics and women’s experiences to warrant comparative analysis. In both cases migration flows have roots in political and economic transformations that have occurred within the context of the cold war or its aftermath, and both are directed to the centers of power of their respective regions. As it has been observed in other contexts, the emergence of regular migratory flows requires the prior penetration of the strong state’s institutions into those of the

weaker one (Portes and Böröcz 1989). For Armenia, Russia has played this significant role, and the United States has done so for Guatemala. As a result, the United States has emerged as the destination of choice for Guatemalan migrants and Russia has become a prime destination for Armenians. The 2000 U.S. Census estimated that there were 487,288 foreign born Guatemalans in the United States (U.S. Census 2000), though unofficial estimates put the number at over one million (Smith 2006). The 2002 Russian Census counted 1,130,491 ethnic Armenians in Russia, but the publicly available data do not differentiate between natives and the foreign-born (Russian Census 2002).

Male migration patterns in both areas are to some extent similar, with uncertain periods of separation between the men and their partners and irregular visits back home. However, Armenians do engage in circulatory migration to a greater degree than Guatemalans do, given their relatively easier entry into Russia. Once in the receiving country—Russia or the United States—the Armenian's and Guatemalan's experiences as migrant and laborers tend to converge. Also, in both countries remittances are central to the economy. Remittances to Guatemala (97 percent of which originate in the United States) exceeded \$ 3 billion in 2005, surpassing the volume of Guatemala's annual exports or income from tourism (Smith 2006). According to Armenian official statistics, annual remittances amount to \$ 300 million, which account for more than 10 percent of the country's GDP, though this figure is likely to be an underestimate because much of the remittance transfers are not officially recorded (Roberts and Banaian 2005). Remittances from abroad have been credited for much of Armenia's economic recovery and growth in past several years (Iradian 2003).

Despite these sizeable injections of capital, both countries remain largely poor, with Gross National Income per capita estimated at \$1100 and \$2200 in Armenia and Guatemala, respectively. Although Guatemalans on average appear somewhat less poor than Armenians, the latter are much better educated, with a literacy rate of almost 100 percent, compared to 69 percent for Guatemalans (The World Bank 2006). In both settings patriarchal ideologies are

strong and patrilocal residence is the norm. Adult men typically remain in their parents' house and bring their wives to live with their families after marriage; daughters, on the contrary, move out of their natal households when they marry. These traditions are particularly strong in rural areas, from which most male migration originates and where we conducted our fieldwork.

WOMEN WHO STAY—THE LITERATURE

The status and lives of non-migrant wives and partners of men who migrate have been the subject of scholarly work across national groups, contexts, and historical periods. Some studies focus on the emancipatory consequences of migration, arguing that women assume more responsibility and decision-making in their homes and families when their marital partners are away. Others note that such new roles create tension and anxiety among the women who stay. Reeder (2001) examined the effects of men's migration on the lives of rural Sicilian families and noted that migration changed the dynamics of the family economy as well as notions of being a husband and a wife. Parreñas (2005) observed that the absence of migrant fathers in the Philippines results in a tremendous increase in power for women in their families. In a study of conjugal relations between Ecuadorian transnational migrants in New York and their wives in the highlands of Ecuador, Pribilsky (2004) found that contrary to the negative effects associated with male migration, these Ecuadorian women's lives had improved because they had assumed new roles and status. Men's and women's conjugal relationships also improved after migration through negotiations trying to maintain their relationships in spite of distance. In her study of low-income families of migrant men in Kerala, India, Gulati (1992) found that while the husbands were abroad, their wives tended to become less dependent on relatives, more responsible for household expenditures, more literate, and more determined to improve their children's care. And as the wives assumed greater responsibility within the household, spousal communication tended to become more egalitarian. In a comparative study of the wives of emigrants and wives of non-migrant men in Jordan, Khaled (1995) observed that

migrants' wives assumed much more supervision of household expenditures than did the non-migrants' wives, which helped to enhance the migrants' wives' own social status. In a similar comparative study in Mexico, Aysa and Massey (2004) concluded that women could be pushed into the labor force after their husbands' migration—and perhaps acquire greater bargaining power as a result—but this transformation is likely to take place only in urban areas, where employment opportunities for women were more plentiful than in the countryside. In her study of Mexican families in California and Jalisco, Goodson-Lowes (1993) noted that women maintained personal authority in their families and communities after their husbands' migration; rather than simply waiting for their husbands to return or following them to the US, the women wielded their authority in various areas, at times in overt ways. And Gonzalez de la Rocha (cited in Salgado de Snyder 1993) argued that as men migrate there is a transfer of power and responsibility to women and thus female empowerment is high in areas of high male out-migration. However, she also made the important observation that this empowerment is not by choice but by default.

Other studies stress that whereas there are transformations in gender roles as a result of men's migration, these are neither simple nor unidirectional. In her study of a Yucatec Maya community in Mexico, Bever (2002) observed that despite obvious transformations in gender roles, gender ideology continued to be strongly defended by both men and women. In a study of migrants in Turkey, Erman (2001) examined how patriarchy reproduces itself in the lives of migrants. Focusing on the perception of the wives who stay in Mexico, Salgado de Snyder (1993) argued that the newly acquired responsibilities and obligations that women are forced to assume as a result of their husbands' migration could empower women but also subject them to considerable stress because these role expansions clash sharply with traditional expectations of gender roles and therefore produce family and social conflict. Thus, Salgado de Snyder, as well as Aysa and Massey (2004), calls for the need to contextualize women's experiences within the

sociocultural milieu where migration-induced changes in responsibilities, power, and roles occur.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The migration of Armenians to Russia has a long history dating back to the Russian conquest of Eastern Armenia from Iran in the end of the 1820s. This migration grew through the Soviet period as a large number of Armenian men went to Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union for seasonal work, popularly known as “*khopan*,” or work in “virgin lands.”¹ The Russia-bound migration flow reached unprecedented proportions due to the economic hardships brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and aggravated by a war with neighboring Azerbaijan in the first half of the 1990s. Much of the early post-Soviet flow was a one-way flight of families frightened and exhausted by the near complete paralysis of the Armenian economy. As the social and economic situation began to stabilize in the late 1990s, permanent emigration subsided. However, macroeconomic stabilization did not lead to a revival of small rural industries created during the Soviet era to provide non-farm employment for both men and women. Nor that stabilization resulted in the growth of agriculture: the tiny private farms that emerged from the rubble of the collectivized farms have been choked by prohibitive production and transportation costs. As a result, rural poverty has remained widespread (Bezemer and Lerman 2004). The economic stagnation of the Armenian countryside, coupled with a relatively strong economic growth in some parts of Russia, has pushed more and more rural Armenian men into *khopan* (OSCE 2006).

Guatemalan migration to the United States also has roots in political instability and economic dislocation. Guatemala’s 36-year civil war, which ended with a peace accord signed in 1996, propelled thousands to flee, mainly to Mexico, the United States, and Canada. U.S.-bound Guatemalan migration also rose after the 1976 earthquake, remaining at a steady rate of about 40,000 per year throughout the 1990s (Smith 2006). Given the complex relations between

the US and Guatemala, at least half of Guatemalans in the United States are undocumented or protected legally only on a temporary basis (Menjívar 2006). The signing of the peace accords has not stopped emigration from Guatemala, as the economy was hard hit during the worse period of the political crisis in the 1980s and many Guatemalans have escaped the lingering economic crisis. While the Guatemalan official unemployment rate in 1994 was relatively low at 4.9 percent, economists have estimated the level of underemployment to be between 30 and 40 percent. Violent crime, fueled by extreme poverty, inequality, and the lack of effective law enforcement, is rampant in Guatemala, and crimes, against women in particular, have escalated.² Thus, Guatemalans from all backgrounds and with a wide range of educational levels have continued to emigrate, and the rate of this flow has steadily accelerated since 1999, with patterns of emigration varying by ethnicity and region.

Though labor migration abroad has been central to the economy and culture of both nations, there are important differences in the migration regimes of both countries. Thus, it is difficult for Guatemalans to obtain a U.S. visa and many of them travel undocumented and by land. The trip is costly physically—they are exposed to armed robbers, extorted and harassed by authorities in Mexico and often fall prey to smugglers—and financially—a trip from Guatemala by land can cost about \$5,000 depending on how difficult it is to cross the southern U.S. border.³ Once in the United States, many of these Guatemalans live in fear of detection and deportation, as there are few avenues for them to regularize their status. Armenian citizens, on the other hand, can enter Russia freely and legally. However, they must register with the police within three days of arrival and upon three months of their stay must leave the country unless they provide justification for a longer stay. But as in the United States, working without authorization is illegal for foreigners in Russia. Complying with the numerous and often ambiguous legal requirements and heavy registration fees is complicated by bureaucrats and police who routinely harass the migrants and extort bribes from them. Even so, going to Russia and working there is easier for Armenians than it is for Guatemalans to go and work in the

United States. It is also less costly, with a roundtrip fare ranging between \$300 and \$600 depending on specific destinations within Russia. However, somewhat similar to their Guatemalan counterparts, many Armenian men who work in Russia do so extra legally and live under a constant threat of deportation.

DATA

Data for this paper come from 29 in-depth interviews conducted in Guatemala and 27 in-depth interviews conducted in Armenia. The ethnographic field work in Guatemala took place during several visits between late 1994 and 2000 in an eastern rural town. Out of 29 women interviewed, 14 had migrant husbands, and all the women were *ladinas*, or non-indigenous, Guatemalans.⁴ A starting point to access the women was the local health post, which provided access to women of different social positions that included class and age variation. We conversed with the women's friends, neighbors, family members and met with community leaders and workers, including health care workers and Catholic priests and evangelical pastors, who complemented greatly the informants' own stories. There were very few opportunities for women to earn an income in this town, even before their male partners emigrated. The women who mentioned earning an income outside the home worked as teachers, street vendors, "comadronas" (midwives), store clerks, and domestics; one worked seasonally as a tomato picker, one made clandestine liquor for sale, and another was a photographer.

The Armenian informants were interviewed in three villages in 2005 and were all ethnic Armenians. They were identified through a snowball sampling technique and all were married to migrants working in Russia. Although different in size, climate, and surroundings, all three villages relied mainly on subsistence agriculture and remittances for economic survival. Despite a certain revival of economic and social life in the villages after the severe crisis of the early-to-mid-1990s, the few small industrial enterprises of the Soviet era still lay abandoned and

unemployment remains high. Even though most women had at least a high school degree and the older ones had worked outside of agriculture as teachers, nurses, or clerks during the “good old” Soviet days, when demand for such occupations existed, the situation is different now. As in Guatemala, there are very few opportunities for women’s work. The majority of our Armenian informants did not have any regular source of income beyond the money that they were receiving from their migrant husbands. This absence of jobs for women in both settings has significant implications for gender relations after their partners’ migration (c.f. Aysa and Massey 2004).

CHANGES AFTER THE HUSBANDS’ MIGRATION

Those who migrate experience life-altering situations, but those who stay go through their share of transformations as well. Arevik, a woman in her mid-thirties in Armenia, described the changes in her life brought about by her husband’s migration: “A lot of things changed. You feel alone and it makes you worried...when you get anxious about something, you want to tell him, but he’s not here... or you feel good [and want to share it with him] but he isn’t here... You want your husband to be home; others live like normal families, and you? But it’s necessary...Only the husband’s return brings back a cherished “normalcy.” And listen to Nazik, another Armenian informant: “When he comes back, life gets very good, joyful...everything changes in the world, it becomes full and beautiful, everything gets better... You wake up every morning in a great mood, together with your family...”

In Guatemala the lives of the women who stay after their partners migrate also change significantly. Given the economic and sociocultural structure of the rural town where we did fieldwork, many women continue to depend on their husbands economically and to live under the watchful eye of his relatives. Thus, like the Armenian women, the Guatemalans usually have a bittersweet view of such changes. On the one hand, they receive money (though not always, or not always regularly) and thus their material conditions improve; on the other hand, they live

more constrained lives, as their movements are more controlled and they are left assuming new and different roles and responsibilities. In both settings the women felt lonely and without the support of their partners. Thus, in many ways, the effect of partners' absence cannot be easily categorized into a positive or a negative gain; examined through the women's eyes allows us to unveil its complexities.

In the following sections we focus on four dimensions of the women's lives through which we can examine the transformations, adjustments, gains and losses resulting from their male partners' emigration. These dimensions—marital/conjugal relations, children, work and finances, and social networks—are pivotal in the women's lives and also have been examined in other studies that have assessed the effects of the men's migration on the women who stay. It should be noted that we consider these areas separately for analytical purposes only; in reality they are very much interrelated and difficult to compartmentalize.

Marital relations and communication

A key area for couples to maintain a conjugal unit while physically separated is communication. In the past, Armenian men typically would come home when harsh Russian winters decreased the demand for their labor, primarily used in construction. These days, however, the return of Armenian men from Russia is not as predictable. Some of the Guatemalan men had devised an intricate system that involved visas and bribes that allowed them to work in the US for nine months, and then to spend three months with their families in Guatemala. But with the militarization of the southern U.S. border not many are able to do so now and thus most are unable to return for frequent visits and consequently are separated from their families for indefinite periods of time.⁵ Therefore, for both Armenians and Guatemalans, communication was critical and an indicator of the men's commitment to their families back home.

It is important to note how people communicate—by phone or, to a lesser extent, through letters—but also to examine what communication means to the parties involved and how its form, frequency, and content relate to the women’s position and to changes in their status. While advances in communication technologies make it increasingly possible for migrants and their partners to maintain regular contact, access to these technologies is not symmetrical. When the men are working in countries where such technologies are less expensive and more easily accessible and the women remain in countries with less developed technology, the dynamics of communication between partners reinforce relations of dependence and gender inequality. As Mahler (2001: 610) notes, under such circumstances, “geographic location translates into social location.” Men’s control over communication with their partners therefore serves to enhance men’s social control over their wives.

Thus, because Armenian and Guatemalan men, by virtue of where they migrate to work, have greater access to both the technology (especially, cellular phones) and money to pay for its use, they control both the timing and frequency of communication. Among both groups, some men phoned every day and even several times a day to monitor their wives’ every step; others went on for weeks without calling. Women sometimes initiated communication, but the reasons for that further underscore their dependency on their husbands. While husbands called to routinely talk with their wives and children, the women called in extraordinary circumstances, usually when they needed extra money for unforeseen expenses. For example, Gayaneh, a former mathematics instructor in her 30s, would normally wait for her husband to call her to her neighbor’s phone in Armenia (she did not have a land line at home or a cellular phone). But as she explained, “if it’s very serious, say, the child’s study for the university entry exams, this is a question of money, I have to call and tell him to send, or for him to say if he agrees or not. If I have health problems, stomach and intestinal problems; this also requires money [and I call].”

The Guatemalan women and their partners in the US seemed to keep regular communication. Like the Armenian women, the Guatemalans also mentioned that it was mostly

their partners who called because it was less expensive to call from the US and it was also “more convenient” that their husbands called. It was mainly through this channel that the husbands were able to maintain control of their partners’ movement and social lives. They would speak on the phone once a week or more, and, as in the Armenian case, the conversations seemed to revolve around routine, everyday matters. The men would also call their relatives and friends and, in this way, they would also check on their wives. Sometimes, if gossip reached the husbands that their wives were seen in the streets chatting with friends or nicely dressed a little too often, the husbands would immediately make arrangements to investigate and if necessary remedy the situation. As a nurse at the health post in Guatemala said, “It’s as if the husbands have a remote control from the United States.” In one case, while living with her parents, Lucrecia, a young woman in her early 20s, was seen going to her friends’ house in the evening more than once, and on one occasion she apparently got into a car with some young men and women. From the US, her partner immediately ordered her to move in to his sister’s house. Lucrecia complied, even though this meant her isolation from childhood friends and her immediate family, as the partner’s sister lived on the other side of town.

In a study of Guatemalan men in California, Worby (n.d.) notes that in general, men reported calling their family on a weekly basis for a 45-60 minute conversation, calling up to two or three times a week taking whatever time is available on a \$5 phone card, or sometimes calling everyday for just a few minutes to greet the children at bedtime or before going to school. And while for the women the frequent phone call can indicate both control and affection, the infrequent phone call is usually taken as bad news (Worby n.d.). For both men and women, if calling is not routine, then mutual suspicion about what the other is doing (with a new partner, using money unwisely, hiding information) sets in and may lead to conflict (Worby n.d.).

Another important facet of conjugal relations relates to perceptions of marital commitment and infidelity.⁶ There are two aspects of infidelity that are relevant to this

discussion. First is the meaning it has in the contexts where the women live, which can have a huge impact on the women's lives and, second, the double standard with which it is applied. Whereas the husbands in both contexts are expected almost by their nature to have affairs and not suffer adverse consequences for that, the expectations for women are very different. As Arusiak, an Armenian informant in her 30s, said, "Our village is a normal Armenian village, I haven't heard of such things [women's infidelity] here. ... We haven't lost our Armenian dignity, have we? Maybe they do such things secretly..." Her words were echoed by Gohar, another Armenian: "A woman has some sense of shame. How can I [be unfaithful], what about my honor, what about my children? But for a man... it doesn't affect his honor..." Moreover, a woman could easily become the subject of rumors simply because she was seen in the street often or visiting with friends. Importantly, as Reeder (2001) observed among the Sicilian women in her study, whether women were indeed involved in a romantic relationship with other men was ultimately less important than what was said about them, as gossip could destroy their reputations. And as is the case among other groups (Mahler 2001; Malkin 2004; Pribilsky 2004), the Armenian and Guatemalan women often *imagined*—based on a missed phone call or on gossip—that their husbands had engaged in affairs with other women while away working. However, migrant men's infidelity is not automatic. Migrants are often socially isolated in host societies and finding sexual partners may be difficult. In addition, as Worby (n.d.) noted, many Guatemalan men in the US choose to focus on their economic goals as a way to avoid the temptation of "vices," such as drinking or sexual relationships. The men employed different strategies, like seeking work, as a socially acceptable way to avoid peer pressure to engage in "vices," and often incorporated religion and religiosity in their lives for the same purpose.

However, sometimes the men were indeed having affairs abroad, and the women would turn a blind eye so as to keep the marital union intact (and remittances flowing) and would try to make sense of it by "accepting" it a normal. The women knew that there were perhaps more opportunities for infidelity where their partners were, but on the other hand, the husbands would

send them money and gifts and thus the women felt that their partners had continued to care and be responsible providers. As Isabel, a Guatemalan in her early 40s and owner of a small store, explained, “Men will always look for other women. Just as long as they don’t forget to be responsible for their children, you know, to send them money. Tell me, how can one stop them? As men, that’s what they do [be unfaithful] whether they are right here in town, in Guate [mala City], in the United States or in China. It doesn’t matter where they are.” Isabel mentioned that she was sure that her husband was seeing other women, but she could not tell him anything. In her words, “I can’t argue with him, I can’t demand an explanation because that’s normal in men, right? My mom tells me, ‘no, don’t argue with him, don’t fight with him, all men do that; he’ll leave you if you bug him too much.’ So at least while he’s here I should keep it all to myself because then he will go to another woman. Sometimes a friend tells me, it’s just gossip, don’t believe what people tell you.” Echoing Isabel, Gohar, in Armenia, explained how people would react to a migrant husband’s infidelity: “They would say that he is a woman-less man, after all, he needs someone to wash his shirts. He works; he sends money to his kids, to his home. What should a man do? A wife can hold it, but a man? Can he restrain himself? No he can’t.” As in Guatemala, what seemed to be more important to the Armenian women was not their husbands’ sexual freedom but their commitment to supporting their children at home. As Maryam, an Armenian woman in her 30s, put it, “They [men] should not forget about their children here. They should take care of their kids, help them, and come to see them once in a while. Children need their father; the father should bring them up...at least a little.”

Importantly, suspicion about or actual marital infidelity on the part of men rarely led to union dissolution, even though, as Gohar put it, “if the woman is jealous, there may be big problems; they may even file for divorce.” In contrast, in both contexts, a woman suspected of infidelity could easily be abandoned. Thus, the issue of unfaithfulness, like communication, also exposes the unequal position of women, exacerbated by distance, geography and social context.

Children

Like migrants in other contexts, the men in Armenia and Guatemala migrate so that their families, particularly their children, can have a better life. In many ways, children help to constitute and reconfigure the relationships and practices between their migrant fathers and the mothers who stay (Orellana et al. 2001) and, as such, shape their mothers' lives in the context of migration. Even for non-migrant mothers in many societies around the world (Kaddour, Hafez, and Zurayk, 2005; Leone, 2004; Thapan 2003; Castaneda, Billings and Blanco, 2003), motherhood is central in defining their status. Within the context of migration motherhood takes on added significance for women's status because through the care of the children they can show that they have fulfilled their roles and at the same time have put to good use the remittances that their husbands send. The women engage in what Hays (1996: x) calls "intensive mothering," that is, spending a huge amount of time, energy, and remitted money in raising children.

The Armenian informants invariably told us how important their husbands' attention was for their children, especially sons, and how their husbands indeed loved and cared for their children. The situation was similar in Guatemala. For instance, Mariana a woman in her mid 20s from one of the wealthier families in town, moved in with her in-laws when her husband left for the US the first time. She did so in order to keep gossip under control. Her husband travels to the US in March and returns around Christmas. Mariana is devoted to their two boys, and proudly explained how she cares for them and her efforts to make sure they are always healthy and looking nice. She beamed when we told her how beautiful her children were. Noticing that her mother-in-law was nearby and making sure she was heard, she explained, "I live for my boys, what else can I do with my life? When my husband is away, I have no other distractions than my boys. I don't care if I leave the house or not. I only do what it's necessary to care for them." When asked if the various housekeepers in her house helped her with the care of her

children, Mariana said that they did, but that she still needed to supervise them because that was her duty as a mother, and “no one else cares for children as their own mother, right?”

Often the mothers would inculcate in the children an image of their fathers as exemplary breadwinners, particularly when they sent money and gifts and would call regularly. As Pribilsky (2004) and Parreñas (2005) also found, an emphasis on children in the context of migration put the women in central roles to foster and mediate the fathers’ relationships with their children. Both the Armenian and Guatemalan mothers would remind the children that their fathers were still very much involved in raising and disciplining them, something that mothers in similar contexts of migration also do. For instance, during one of our visits, Lila, a Guatemalan woman in her late 30s, told her children that if they kept on going out to play in the street and not do their school work, that she was going to tell their father when he called them. We asked if this was something that she normally did. Smiling and lowering her voice so that her children could not hear her, she explained, “No, of course I don’t. Can you imagine me telling him all the little things that happen around here? I tell him some things, but not everything. But I tell them [the children] that because they are afraid of him; he’s very strict. And if he knows that they’re fooling around, he won’t bring them gifts from there [the US] when he comes home for the holidays. So they know that they have to behave with me...He’s here even if he’s away.”

Being able to provide for the children so that they can attend school and making special purchases for them is an important marker of the success of migrant households in the eyes of the community (see Pribilsky 2004). But it was the responsibility of the women to make sure that expenditures reflected the husbands’ success abroad. For instance, in Guatemala Vera, a teacher by training in her early 20s, recounted with joy the celebration of her daughter’s first birthday. Her husband was not going to be able to attend the party because he was working in the United States, but he sent money and a box with decorations for the party and a dress for the girl. She explained, “It was a great party. We invited practically the whole town. We had everything, cake, food, music, everything. And we gave these very cute party favors that he [her

husband] had sent from there [the US]. Even the candle for the cake was from there [the US]. Everyone was very happy. Afterwards, everyone talked about the party. People still remember the celebration.” Mothers also made sure that when remittances were regular, their children got adequate health care, and would often take their children to see a private physician in a larger city, rather than in the rural town as a sign of improved material conditions at home. In a sense, the men had become better fathers and providers because they had left, and this was demonstrated in the improved social status of their families. Sometimes the children would get spoiled, as the father would want to earn their love by sending them money and gifts when away, and when at home, by not interfering much with their discipline. To emphasize the continuing and central role of migrant fathers in their children’s upbringing, the women in both contexts would typically consult with their husbands on decisions involving the children, including such seemingly inconsequential ones as letting a teenage child go to a party in Guatemala or to a camping trip outside the village in Armenia.

To be sure, some migrant men were unsuccessful economically and thus were unable (or sometimes unwilling) to send enough money or to send money at all. In such cases the children’s material conditions became both a gauge for the financial situation of the family and a sign of abandonment. In Guatemala we heard people evaluating who sent more or less money, whom they considered was on the verge of being abandoned, and who was doing better in the US, all based on the welfare of the children. The nurses at the health post once provided a quick run down on most of the town as follows. “You can easily see the results of migration by looking at how much the mothers put into the care of the children. As mothers, they do all they can, but if they can also count on dollars, that’s even better. So, look around. Sonia gets money from her husband all the time, as he’s very punctual, and you can see her children are very healthy and clean and look nice. Her neighbor’s husband apparently found another woman in the US [and abandoned the neighbor], and look at the children, they haven’t even bought vitamins in two months.” In one case, the husband in California had started to drink, and the

wife went to ask his parents for money to bring him back to Guatemala, as she put it, “before the family disintegrates on account of his disease. At least if he’s here the children will have their father nearby.”

Work and economic conditions

Few women in both settings engaged in regular paid work outside the home both because non-farm employment opportunities were scarce and because through remittances the husbands discouraged them from looking for the few opportunities available. In Armenia several of the study participants were college-educated and previously had worked in non-agricultural occupations but could no longer find any application for their skills in the moribund village economy. In Guatemala there were very few jobs available outside of agricultural work, and women did not engage in farm labor. Thus, even though Armenian women had a higher educational level than Guatemalan women, the lack of employment opportunities in both contexts made this difference largely irrelevant. And in both settings the husbands’ remittances directly influenced the women’s participation in paid work. In some cases, as has been noted in other contexts (see Parreñas 2005), the husbands would not “allow” their wives to engage in work outside the home while they were away, and this way, they were able to maintain control of the women’s lives directly (through the money they sent) and indirectly (by imposing their will and decision-making power). Thus, in these rural areas, patriarchal culture helps legitimize and perpetuate this control.

In some instances, women had to stop working because of their husbands’ insistence. This was the case of Teresa, a self-described housewife in her 20s in Guatemala, who used to work at a factory in a nearby city but had to quit when her partner started sending her money from the US. She explains, “He didn’t like me traveling by bus to go to work because it used to take me about one hour to get there and the buses are usually packed. Sometimes it was all men, you know, it can be dangerous. So he [her partner] told me that this was the reason why

he sent me money every month. If I didn't stop working, he wasn't going to send me money anymore."

Ofelia, an office clerk in her 20s, stops working for pay when her husband is in town and resumes work when he leaves. We visited with Ofelia twice—the first time when she was working and the second time when she was not. On our second visit, when we looked for Ofelia at her workplace and could not find her one of her co-workers explained, "You see, she's very nice and quiet and feels very embarrassed, but this is her situation. She has to quit working because he won't let her do anything when he's here. Oh yes, he knows that she works when he's not around, and really gives her a hard time about it. He even has come back furious to make her stop working. But when he's here, that's it. She can't come to work, or else...well, he's really terrible. He has a temper and doesn't like to be contradicted."

In both settings, even before the men's migration, men were clearly in charge of the family's budgets and their migration hardly gave women any opportunities to alter male dominance. In both settings the women felt that they could make decisions on small, quotidian matters, but for decisions that seemed "more serious" they would have to consult their husbands. But "small" and "more serious" are, of course, subjective distinctions, as sometimes the women would consult their partners for things that might not seem big or important to outside observers but that for the women were so, especially if they involved non-trivial expenses. It is here that the men's already privileged position was magnified as a result of their migration. For instance, as Gayaneh in Armenia said, "I can decide everything, but every serious thing is connected with money, and I also have to tell him about it, so that he sends money to get it [the needed thing]."

Similarly, in Guatemala the women would consult their partners for a range of decisions, from what they could bring to a birthday party (making sure that the gift reflected the husband's actual or perceived success) to the children's school work, health and doctor's visits, to living arrangements and expenditures on clothing or repairs of the house. For instance, Lucia, a

woman in her early 40s and one of the few wives of a migrant husband who was employed outside the home, mentioned that she and her husband speak on the telephone once a week. She takes these opportunities to update him on all the happenings in the house so that when he returns he “doesn’t find any surprises.” She asks him what she should do about a leaking roof, whether she should attend a funeral, whether she should contribute to a school fundraising, what to do about a church service that is held in the evenings and she would really like to attend, and whom she should take to a wedding the following week. In her view, the more she informs him, the less potential for gossip and trouble, and the more he feels he is still a part of the house. “This way, while he is away, he feels integrated as if he were here...you know, ordering everyone around and telling us how to do everything (laughs).”

The literature often stresses that women whose husbands migrate tend to assume typically masculine tasks such as driving (see Pibilsky, 2004) or fixing things around the house. Our study participants in both settings did not mention such changes. In fact, what we often heard was the other side of the story: that the husbands, in Russia or the US, had to carry out tasks that they would not normally do at home, such as cooking and doing laundry. Noteworthy, in such cases men’s new household and family duties, while often physically challenging, were episodic and situational. On the other hand, women carry on their shoulders the daily routine of responsibilities, with or without their husbands present. And in both settings, when the husbands were away and the women needed something that was beyond their skills or was at odds with gender role expectations, they would turn to their (usually male) kin, in-laws, friends, and neighbors for help. The section below further illustrates the dynamics of such support.

Kin and non-kin social support

In both Armenia and Guatemala, tradition dictates that upon marriage (common-law or formal) the woman leaves her household to join her husband’s. Patrilocal residence places the wife under the authority of the husband’s family, particularly his mother (see Kandiyoti 1988)

and, thus, the woman does not only live under the vigilant eye of the husband but of his family as well. Naturally, in the few instances when the marital couple does not co-reside with the husband's parents and relatives (which is the case when the husband has married brothers who live with the parents or when the couple has already built their own home), the woman's relations with her in-laws may decrease in intensity, as the husband often interacts with his parents separately. Yet, the control that in-laws exert over the wife often increases when the husband migrates. Importantly, women do not perceive this enhanced control as oppressive and, in fact, they tend to depict it as their in-laws' increased attention to their needs while their husbands are away. In some cases, however, this increased attention may not be perceived as altruistic at all. As Anush, a woman in her 40s in Armenia, noted, "Yes, now that he left, they know how much he earns. They think, oh, he must be sending a lot of money. They are nice to you because they want the money." In Guatemala the women also would start or continue to live with their in-laws after their husbands migrated. In some Guatemalan cases the husbands would send remittances to their own parents, and the in-laws would distribute the money to their daughter-in-law according to how well they thought the daughter-in-law was managing the money (and behaving) in her husbands' absence.

Women in both settings talked about their relationships with non-relatives, especially with their neighbors. Some Armenian informants told us that their neighbors, particularly the wives of other migrant men, became a source of support and assistance when their husbands went away. For minor daily needs they readily asked neighbors for help and this help was usually mutual. "My neighbors are very good," commented Gayaneh, "Most of our husbands are away, so we help one another in every way we can. For example, I am here at my neighbor's house to have a cup of coffee and also to give her a hand to knead dough and make *lavash*." The neighbors are also the ones to whom women turn in case of medical or other emergencies, especially if relatives and in-laws are unavailable or unable to help. However, women also pointed out that they were careful not to ask neighbors for assistance too often. "I can ask my

neighbor to help once, he will help,” said Gohar, “but I’ll be ashamed to ask him again.” When the husbands come back, women’s reliance on their neighbors and others ceases. As Soná, a former teacher in her late 30s remarked, “When my husband is here, we don’t even feel the need for help; he does everything, be it work or budget, he does it all.”

Women’s interactions with neighbors and other non-relatives are certainly not limited to exchanges of material assistance. Much of the daily interactions consist of light and superficial conversations at frequent even if short visits, which in Armenia are invariably accompanied by coffee. The fact that other women also have their husbands in *khopan* and that men from the same village often go to the same place to work in Russia, gives women more reasons for sharing (and commiserating). For some Armenian women, their husbands’ absence facilitates spending time with others because the women feel lonely and with no pressure to be at home all the time and constantly care for their husbands’ needs. For others, however, such interactions diminish when their husbands migrate, for the women feel uncomfortable socializing without their husbands. Family chores and other responsibilities may also limit such interactions as well. In Guatemala women were also careful not to be seen as socializing too much. In the words of Teresa, “One doesn’t have time for anything here. Between the children and the house, preparing food, and helping my mother-in-law with her chores, sometimes I don’t even have time to comb my hair. I am always very busy.” A compelling reason for limiting interactions with non-relatives in both settings was the women’s fear of gossip, which could reach their husbands and lead to serious problems, including union dissolution.

CONCLUSION

Globalization is radically reshaping social, economic, cultural, and political systems. The reorganization of production on a global scale brings about a restructuring of daily life, including changes in consumption patterns, cultural practices, community and family networks, and household relationships. Migratory movements, as tangible expressions of globalizing trends, are dramatically and diversely affecting the lives of a growing number of women and men. The

migration of men, responding to labor demands in the restructured economies of the centers of power, is having profound effects on the lives of the women who stay. Importantly, these effects are mediated by the sociocultural environment in which the women live as well as by the context in which the men generate incomes. As Aysa and Massey (2004) note, the sociocultural milieu is central in shaping migration-related changes in responsibilities, power, and roles.

Our examination of the four dimensions of Armenian and Guatemalan women's lives—marital/conjugal relations, children, work and finances, and social networks—allow us to discern factors that mediate and shape the effects of men's migration on the women who stay. These include limited job opportunities for these women, lack of access to secure and well-paying jobs for their partners in their migration destination, as well as sociocultural dictates and gender ideologies of the contexts in which the migration takes place. Thus, as we contextualize our examinations, we should expect that the outcomes will differ across sociocultural milieus. For instance, a dissimilar configuration of factors, such as different income-earning opportunities for women in the place of origin and for men in the place of destination, or different sociocultural norms, such as uxorilocal residence following marriage or more egalitarian gender ideologies, might generate different dynamics of gender relations in the context of migration. Furthermore, our qualitative observations point to complexity, whereby, from the point of view of the women involved, the consequences of their partners' absence cannot always be captured in black-and-white terms (c.f. Salgado de Snyder 1993; Aysa and Massey 2004). Whereas women may gain a measure of control over some aspects of their lives, they may lose control in others. Furthermore, even what to outside observers may appear to be increased control of the women's lives and decreased emancipation, to the women these outcomes may signal a partner's love and care for themselves and their children.

Studies point to the empowerment of women whose partners migrate for work as women left behind must take charge of new duties and decision making. Other works emphasize that women's new tasks do not necessarily translate into their empowerment, as the expansion of

their roles may lead to tension and conflict in a context that still expects women to follow strict gendered expectations of behavior. However, both bodies of literature assume that women take on added responsibilities when their husbands migrate for work and that these new responsibilities transform women's status and relationships. Yet, the comparative observations from Armenia and Guatemala that we presented here offer important qualifications to this assumption and its implications. Whereas women do fulfill some additional tasks when their husbands leave, neither the nature nor the scope of these tasks challenge the deeply entrenched gender inequality. In fact, on balance, the division of labor established through the husbands' migration further reinforces gender inequality. On the one hand, women still live in contexts with strong patriarchal norms and few opportunities for paid employment; on the other, men find themselves in milieus where they have relatively more access to resources—through work and technology. As a result, men's role as breadwinners and primary decision-makers is further strengthened and amplified, as is women's own subordinate position. Under such conditions, the women's potential gains in terms of power and autonomy in the absence of their husbands are compromised, as geographical location intensifies gendered power asymmetries.

The cases presented here illustrate the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization to men and women. They also point to another important general conclusion. While transforming the world over, globalization sometimes leaves certain aspects of human life and relationships largely intact, and paradoxically, perpetuates and reinforces some of them.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The term is a relic of the Soviet government's push in the 1950s and 1960s to entice young people from the European part of the U.S.S.R to settle and participate in the development of the so-called "virgin lands," the vast and sparsely populated areas in northern Kazakhstan).

² Guatemala currently registers over 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Many of those killed are young men believed to be associated with street gangs (Smith, 2006). Femicide has become a serious concern in this Central American country as well. In 2003, 383 women were found dead with signs of torture on their bodies (Menjívar n.d.).

³ With the militarization of the U.S. southern border (see Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002), these costs have increased substantially. The risks of making the trip also have escalated.

⁴ The term *ladina* refers to the nonindigenous Guatemalans who speak Spanish and wear Western clothing; they are mostly mestizas (as well as European descendants) who have been culturally Hispanicized. Indigenous, or Maya, Guatemalans typically (though not always) wear their traditional attire that varies by region and speak one (or more) of 21 Mayan languages. However, this is not a simple ethnic difference. The indigenous are more likely than *ladinos* to be poor and to not have access to formal education or health care; they are also associated with low social status. So class and ethnicity are deeply intertwined.

⁵ Menjívar (2006) deals with the consequences these indefinite separations as a result of an ambiguous legal status have for these families. Worby (n.d.) also notes the men's inability to decide about coming home—because they should make money while he can, he may never be back again, or could be deported tomorrow. One of her study participants stated: "I told my wife that I would definitely be home by Christmas," one day laborer told me along with recounting his wife's reaction: "Yes, but which Christmas?"

⁶ Prolonged separations between migrant men and their spouses have been shown to lead to new sexual partnerships at points of migration destinations. These new partnerships may not only affect the strength of the conjugal commitment but may also have implications for health. Thus Dladla et al. (2001) in their study in South Africa describe wives' perceptions of their migrant husbands' infidelity and related fears of contracting HIV.