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United States: The Influence of Gender on
Destinations and Destinies**

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Abstract

This article explores the role gender plays on the development of migratory trajectories of Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran labour migrants crossing the Guatemala-Chiapas border. It aims to assess the way gender influences the migration processes of those crossing either to work in the borderland of Chiapas and/or with the intention of travelling northwards to enter the United States of America. By using elements of structuration theory, it contributes to the study of migration by incorporating gender as a constitutive element in the migratory process of Central Americans crossing and living in the southern border area of Mexico; an important and understudied borderland within the North American system of migration.

As it has been noted (Donato, *et al*, 2006), studies published since the 1980s have succeeded in highlighting the relevance of gender in migration studies. However, as some scholars have pointed out (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; 2003; Moch, 2005), there is a need to approach gender as a concept and not as a variable: analyses that incorporate gender into the discussion as a transversal element, rather than just as a sex differential and a dichotomous variable that divides men from women. As a response to this need, the essence of this article is to explore how gender is a crucial part of the migratory process, – one that strongly influences migratory outcomes.

Bringing gender into the discussion as a constitutive part of the process helps to show that it is not something immutable but is instead constructed and embedded in different areas of life (Glenn, 1999). It helps to show that a migrant's agency is embedded in gendered multi-layered structures and patriarchal systems that transcend the household. Thus, if gender is embedded in different areas of life, it is then present in different spaces and on different scales as Pessar and Mahler (2003) suggest. To illustrate this, they developed a model called “Gendered Geographies of Power”, which is a step forward in taking into account gender in the theorising of migration, considering patriarchal structures in different layers (not only within the household) and on assessing whether migration is seen by movers as a way to challenge such patriarchal relationships or whether such movements actually reinforce patriarchal structures. However, as Donato and colleagues (Donato *et al*, 2006:4) recognise, there is still the need for more theorisation: “many migration scholars now insist that migration itself is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools”; hence the aim of this paper.

Through the case study of migration from Central America, across the Guatemala-Chiapas border, I intend to contribute by using the structuration model as a framework of analysis, incorporating the element of gender in it. Using the structuration model I explore how structures in different levels, in both sending and receiving countries, are gendered from the moment migration is triggered and throughout the entire process. I also explore how these gendered structures dynamically interact with the agency of both male and female migrants: an agency that in response contributes to the development and shape of social networks (micro-structures), making migration possible. Additionally, by presenting this particular case study, I intend to contribute to the knowledge of Central American migration across the southern border area of Mexico; an important and understudied phenomenon within the North American system of migration.

The article consists of three parts: the first establishes a foundation in order to understand the analysis presented here, by presenting a brief background of the migratory phenomenon in the Guatemala-Chiapas border, and by describing which theoretical and methodological elements were used. The second part is dedicated to exploring the dynamic interaction of gendered structures and agency during three recognised phases of the migratory process: the decision-making process, the moment travelling from the place of origin to Chiapas, and the different experiences of male and female migrants' once in Chiapas. In the last part, I will conclude by clarifying how the structuration model could incorporate the element of gender and how this would contribute to the understanding of gender as an essential part of the migratory process – helping us to understand the role of gender in migration outcomes (destinies and destinations).

Setting the foundation

The analysis of this article is based on a study of the migratory phenomenon at the southern Mexican border; specifically, across the Guatemala-Chiapas border. This area is the most dynamic point in terms of number and heterogeneity of migrants crossing. Furthermore, it is a border whereby northbound (transmigrationⁱ to the United States) and intra-regional migration (to work in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, Mexico, in sectors such as commerce, domestic help, agriculture, construction, sex work and service) are interlinked.

Background

The Soconusco constitutes 8% of Chiapas territory (74,415 km²). Six of its sixteen boroughs border Guatemala: Suchiate, Frontera Hidalgo, Metapa, Tuxtla Chico, Cacahoatán and Unión Juárezⁱⁱ. These boroughs, together with Tapachula, are a strategic location linking Central America with the rest of Mexico and North America. As well at its natural richness (around 6,000 km² of fertile land and eight rivers), it has always been considered a strategic area for foreign investment (Arriola, 1995). The main crossing point from Guatemala to Chiapas is the one between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán; two cities divided by the Suchiate River. It is a border full of contradictions where the boundaries between lawfulness and unlawfulness are blurred. Within this context, it is possible to distinguish a diversity of migratory flows. There are female and male migrants, mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, who, as was noted, either have the United States in mind as their final destination or who cross with the intention of working in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, Mexico in sectors such as commerce, domestic service, agriculture, sex service and bars,

construction and service. Some may be undocumented, some not, some may be staying temporarily in the region, some permanent; some have been able to fulfil their original plans, but others may have needed to readjust.

Methodological notes

The focus of this study was to analyse the migratory trajectories of migrants crossing this border: that is, the migration process from the moment someone takes the decision to migrate, to the moment they are in the border area or the wider Soconusco region of Chiapas, (a region where the majority of migratory flows are concentrated).

The empirical evidence to support the analysis was collected during 2002 and 2003 through qualitative fieldwork within this border area: mainly via participant observation, face-to-face interviews to key informants and to 38 women and men labour migrants. The sample composition was based on working age labour migrants crossing the border from the three main sending Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras). The aim was to obtain a representational sample covering a wide range of migratory experiences of both male and female migrants aspiring to migrate to the United States or crossing with the intention of working in the border area and Soconusco region of Chiapas. Attention was paid to actual experiences rather than on representative figures or percentages. Certainly, to achieve this, the use of qualitative research methods was appropriateⁱⁱⁱ. Throughout the article I will analyze these different migratory experiences and will use some fragments of interviews in order to support my arguments.

Theoretical notes

Structuration theory

For the analysis, I used the theory of structuration, taken from the sociological domain.

Migration viewed as a structuration process allows its understanding from the outset and throughout the entire process, taking into consideration global, middle and local level macro and microstructures dynamically interacting with the agent's motivations and actions. This integration is conceptualised by Morawska (1985, 2001) as *migration as a structuration process* and aims to improve migration theory by integrating structuration theory into the explanation of migration processes.

I consider this conceptualisation and also take into account Sewell's (1992) contribution to structuration theory in my analysis. He suggested that to be an agent was precisely to have the capacity to transform, but that this happened within a cultural and historical framework. Sewell considers agency as "the actor's capacity to reinterpret and mobilize an array of resources in terms of cultural schemas other than those that initially constituted the array" (p.19). Therefore, he concludes that structures are dynamic and evolve over time and that the concept of change needs to be recognised and based on a multiple and fractured conception of structure (agents can be creative within structures that are imperfect, heterogeneous and act at different levels).

I also take into account Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation of agency which allows us to understand how agents' actions work considering its engagement in structure, their reactions and decisions according to them and their relationship with their past, present

and future, which, as they explain, are not simply successive stages of action. In this way, Emirbayer and Mische consider that agency is three-dimensional – this understanding of agency is crucial for my analysis: An *iterational*, *projective*, and *practical-evaluative* dimension are present. All three interact simultaneously. The first refers to interiorised past patterns, which help to build identities and social universes. The second is future-oriented, relating to imagination, dreams, possible options and trajectories of action for the future. The third dimension concerns the capacity to take practical decisions regarding immediate and present situations.

People's motives

For the analysis, I also take into consideration Schutz' (1967; 1967b) distinction of people's motives: 'because motives', which are forces grounded in external structures and resources, and 'in-order-to motives' representing peoples' dreams and motivations. I believe that by understanding people's decisions and actions within these frameworks, the process of understanding men and women migrant agency is facilitated.

The element of change

As a consequence of the disaster caused by Hurricane Stan the environment in this border area has suffered changes. The region had to deal with casualties, many collapsed bridges, the destruction of people's properties and even a new river channel for the Suchiate River, which divides Guatemala and Mexico. This new panorama unquestionably led to changes in migration trends in the region (and without doubt opens up the possibility of recognising migration as a changing process) – the documentation of those changes is a work in progress.

Gendered migratory trajectories

At the hometown

When a migratory process starts, there are structural conditions in sending and receiving areas that will influence migrants' decisions, motivations and plans. These meso and micro conditions ('because of' motives) are the gendered employment opportunities in sending and receiving areas (either in the Chiapas or in the United States), the information about such opportunities, as well as gender divisions within the community and the household. Under these circumstances, plans, motivations and decisions ('in order to' motives) of migrants will be influenced at the moment of planning and deciding to migrate.

Employment conditions and opportunities

Macro and meso structures have triggered the movement of migrants from Central America, via setting employment conditions in both, sending and receiving areas. Mexican and Central American economies were pushed to participate in the global market by inserting the agricultural sector into the export market. In this way, Central American agro-exportation forced many locally oriented medium and small-scale agriculture producers out of the market. Peasants had to work on large plantations in areas outside their communities, work in urban areas, or even work outside their country. For instance, in the first half of the twentieth century, Guatemala adopted an agro-export economy, which increased its dependency on importing countries and forced small and medium scale producers out of the market. These difficult economic conditions played an important part in the migration to the Soconusco

region in Chiapas where many worked mainly in the similarly export-oriented coffee plantations.

In addition to this, during the 1960s the movement of men and women agricultural workers from the Highlands of Chiapas to plantations in the Soconusco region significantly decreased the demand for Guatemala's labour force (Castillo, 1997:207; Ángeles, 2002:30), this demand being predominantly for male workers. This crisis in rural areas has also resulted in women and men migrants working in the commerce and also in the construction sector – dominated by men –, and in the domestic work sector, dominated by women^{iv}.

In the same decade, global structural forces also encouraged foreign investment by means of export-oriented manufacturing companies – always in search of a cheap and disposable labour force and ready to move out to places that could provide lower production costs. This situation became aggravated after the 1970s by the significant rise in import prices (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1991:89). In Central America (as in many other areas), many of the people working in these types of industry are women from urban areas who because of the nature of these industries can easily be made redundant. Under such precarious circumstances they may think about the possibility of migrating.

Without a doubt, redundancy in urban areas has influenced the migration of both men and women; but it is worthwhile highlighting that because of the aforementioned circumstances, migration of urban women from Central America (as from other regions in the world) has increased. Hence employment opportunities and the information about them in sending areas

are usually gendered. This is how migrants in sending communities (at the micro level) know that while some sectors require female labour, others require male, and some require both.

For instance, as I noted through observation, interviews and bibliography review, the commerce sector offers opportunities for men and women migrants. The agricultural sector presents a slightly different scenario; the proportion of men employed is higher however, as with commerce, men and women can be contracted^v. In the case of the service sector in Chiapas, there is a demand for male or female migrants. Working in the service sector is not an organised dynamic in itself because it is actually a sector usually covered by trans-Mexican (or transitory) migrants (as construction may also be). This means that migrants use this work more as a strategy to save money for the journey to the United States, rather than an ultimate plan itself – and this can be seen with the information from this study regarding this sector. In the case of migration to the United States, there exists the knowledge about employment for both genders or those that may be considered gender specific (e.g. service – both genders, domestic – female, or construction – male). Regardless, there is sufficient information about job opportunities for both male and female migrants.

Hence, it can be said that in general terms, migratory trajectories of these migrants are shaped in relation to information about gendered employment opportunities. Agents (the migrants) allocate the earning power according to gender and adapt their decisions according to the information they have about gendered employment structures. Another relevant element at the decision-making moment is migrants' household structure.

Household organisation

The way the family organise their productive and reproductive activities and the interaction between the members towards gender, influence who will migrate, why and how. Such gender divisions of labour influence the decisions to migrate, shaping the path a migrant will take while also giving form to social networks involved during the whole process (Boyd, 1989:656). Based on these, migration could be considered a family or an individual strategy (Phizacklea, 1983:7), or a combination of both.

When migration is a family strategy, the members left behind expect some benefits from migration – the objective of collaborating with the family income. Within the family, it could be decided that a female or a male member is the one who should migrate. It is clear that decision-making is influenced by the role of a man and woman within a household and sometimes women's migration may be favoured as a survival strategy since the woman's role in the family is more altruistic than the man's – prioritising the needs of her children, partner or parents before her personal ones: “women migrants tend to be more committed to sustaining ties with home areas than men” (Chant & Radcliffe, 1992:17). Because of this attachment, women “are generally considered to be more reliable at sending home remittances, especially to those relatives caring for their children” (Henshall, 1999:303)^{vi}. Indeed, as Tacoli suggests (1999:663), “in the context of migration, these relations of reciprocity are likely to play an important role, since they often form the basis of networks linking source and destination areas”. Thus, as Wilson (1998:115) suggests “the family economy is often heavily dependent upon women's labour contribution”.

In population movement across the Guatemala-Chiapas border, it is possible to find migration as a family strategy in the case for instance, of Guatemalan domestic workers. When a domestic worker migrates, her position within the household and the decision to migrate at the very first moment is normally not independent. Even if the future domestic worker is willing to migrate, it is a family decision and the male head of the household (when he exists) has the last word. This is also the case with female agricultural workers because male members of the family usually influence and even decide upon women's migration. Those cases are slightly different from commerce workers in the sense that in this sector, the position of women is more central, and even when migration could be either a family or an individual strategy it does not necessarily rely on male members of the household.

In this phase of the migratory process, gender relationships within the family also play a role in the planned destination. For instance, it is likely in the case of young single female migrants (like the majority of domestic workers), that the head of the family will prefer her daughter to migrate to Chiapas instead of the United States in order to keep a tighter control over the daughter and her wages. Also, a male head of the family may decide to work in the region instead of a more distant location, in order to keep a close relationship and authority over his family.

Furthermore, the position of members within the family influences the perception of economic contribution and therefore migration plans and decisions: In the presence of a male head, his salary is considered the main source and the wife's and the children's (men or women), complementary. Certainly, when it comes to female economic contribution as

Morokvasic (1984:888) pointed out, the “role in wage employment is usually not considered as their primary role, neither by them [the women] nor by their employers”. Only in those cases when the male head of household is absent, a female member will assume the role of breadwinner.

This was the case of Eladia, a Guatemalan commerce worker who is the household breadwinner and thus has to cross the border daily to sell products:

I started having a hard time with my husband. He was irresponsible and didn't give me money. Then my son started to get ill and I had to find the means to heal him. I finally decided to leave my husband and support my family on my own. I've been on my own for 13 years.

As illustrated by Eladia's words, women normally combine economic with personal needs (in view of migration as both an individual and a family strategy). As Tacoli (1999:678) points out,

International migration may offer the possibility to combine self-interest (that is, the freedom resulting from spatial distance from households, in which gender roles are crystallized) with self-sacrifice (as higher earnings allow for higher remittances).

For example, the decision to migrate as domestic workers or engage in migration to the United States may have been agreed within the family as a way to obtain a complementary salary. This gives the female migrant the possibility of leaving the household without causing

any conflict, while at the same time the migrant is able to gain a certain degree of autonomy from the family authority.

The following testimony clarifies how the decision to migrate was inspired by both, the necessity of autonomy and the necessity of providing economic support:

I realised I wanted my own money because from what my father used to earn, I've received only three pesos. That is why I decided to work here in Tapachula. I decided to work on my own because I knew I was not going to be able to help my parents enough, they were having more children, the family was growing and the more members there were, the more money we needed.

Virginia, a 29-year-old domestic worker already settled in Tapachula.

Gender relations within the family can also drive migration as a result of conflict and these are cases when migration is a clear individual strategy. Examples of this kind of migration are some of the women who decide to migrate to the United States or those working as sex workers in border towns.

This is the case of Irene, a 23-year-old woman from Honduras who was working in the sex industry and talked to me about her reasons for leaving her household and migrating:

I was a housewife with three kids. After a fight with my husband, two other friends and I planned to try to migrate and cross to the United States. Then we arrived in Guatemala, to Tecún Umán.

Therefore, aside from their economic needs, these migrants also decide to leave their hometowns escaping from an aggressive or repressive structure in which their position as a woman set them in a vulnerable situation within the household. Indeed, in the Chiapas border area, a study conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (National Institute of Public Health) in 1999, showed that almost half of the interviewed sex workers in the Chiapas region declared that they had escaped from household violence (Rojas, 2002:99).

Thus, regarding migration on this border, as in any other region, “economic reasons and the desire for change... . [are] equally important and in several cases overlapping” (Tacoli, 1999:670); this overlapping is not divorced from gendered divisions and conditions within the household.

Community structure and gendered information and support

While gendered divisions within the family may trigger and channel migration, members of the migrant’s community may also play an important role at the decision-making moment in a gendered fashion. Community members may serve as role models for new migrants, and/or may also help in the migrating and job seeking process.

Distinctively, gender specific community networks inform and support the future migrant. This is particularly noted in migrants working in gender specific sectors such as domestic, sex, construction or even agriculture. In the case of domestic and sex work (which are largely female sectors) or even in the commerce sector (in which participation of women is high), female networks within the community are crucial from the beginning of the process,

providing information about work opportunities in the destination, preliminary know-how as well as promise of support during the migration and during the job hunting process. These gender-specific community networks are also present with male migrants, as in the clear case of the construction sector and also the agriculture sector, a sector that is not gender specific but which contains a higher proportion of males.

Gender-specific community networks build trust to start a migratory process. This is very clear in the case of women who migrate without the direct support from their family (probably in those cases when migration is a way out of conflict), because without the emotional and practical support of their female friends and relatives (support to migrate itself and to take care of their children once they leave), their decision, and their possibilities for leaving, would be less likely and less numerous respectively. Indeed, this was the case of the seven sex workers I interviewed, of the three women working in the service sector and the case of one of the two female transitory migrants.

This is the testimony of one of them: Jenny, a 19 year old Honduran who was trying to migrate to the United States.

The truth is that in my country the economic situation is very difficult. I am a single mother and have a baby who stayed with her father's mother because my mum is sick and has another young daughter, so she couldn't take care of her.

Apart from the direct information and support that members of the community can offer to the new migrant, they also influence him/her by way of their image of potential success; a

woman or man may empathise with women or men from their community who have already migrated aspiring to achieve the same – these examples of success from the community will nourish their projective dimension of agency. In the particular case of women, an image of success and independency possessed by previous female migrants in the hometown may be a motivator to escape from an oppressive situation – such as an unhappy marriage, a strict patriarchal structure, or an experience of stigmatisation and social exclusion (Connell, 1984: 966).

Thus, these microstructures, that is, the household structures in which the migrant is embedded and the structural conditions within the community of origin are gendered and in this fashion the new migrant's action is influenced; gendered 'because of' motives influencing the new migrant's 'in order to' motives to migrate.

On the way

The obstacles and opportunities encountered during the journey and the implications for migrant's agency will be explored here. How within these conditions influencing migratory paths, gender has an important role in terms of risks, barriers and opportunities that appear once a migrant leaves hometown.

Obstacles (risks and barriers)

In addition to the vulnerability that comes with undocumented status, undocumented migrants, especially women, are exposed to molestation, sexual abuse, threats or deceit by local and migratory authorities, members of the migration business, or gangs – the so called

Maras Salvatruchas who are set along migratory routes, hidden in the woods or on the cargo trains.

Female migrants are in danger of being forced to provide 'sexual favours' in order to avoid being denounced by local people or authorities or deported by migratory authorities. Women may even find themselves obliged to do sex work because people involved in this business make them believe that without their intervention (paying a 'fine' to authorities), they would have been deported. Without doubt, it is also common to find cases when women have been offered a job allegedly in the service sector, which turns out to be in the sex sector^{vii}.

This was the case of Mercy. She had left her three children behind in order to join her partner who had left for the United States one year previously to her:

They detained and forced me to come here, they told me that I had either to pay a fine or to work in a bar and the owner of the bar could pay the fine for me: "it is a restaurant" they said, but it wasn't a restaurant, it was a bar. When we first arrived, we cried a lot, but my cousin was able to leave the bar and began working in another place; she is now a cook.

Risks of being forced to work in the sex business, or even being sexually abused, are the main differences in terms of gender: these differences act as an obstacle that may block or divert original migration plans. Therefore, in the particular case of women migrating to the United States, a strong social network is crucial. This is how migrants and the migration

industry have created specific tactics such as the use of forged documents or tourist visas to allow women to cross.

Aside from structural barriers that women encounter along the way, it is commonly found that female migrantes encounter structural barriers within their own network. Women may be on their own when they decide to migrate in those cases when they are escaping from household violence and conflicts or when their social network considers women's migration as risky, and refuse to help.

Kelly's testimony is a good example of this. Her ex-husband, who is living in the United States, offered to help her and now that she has left Honduras the ex-husband has changed his mind and refused to have any contact with her.

I try to call the telephone number that supposedly was from his house, but apparently he doesn't live there anymore.

I don't know if he is really willing to help me or not. That is why I get desperate because I call my ex-mother-in-law in Honduras and she keeps telling me that he has not called her. She is denying me any possibility of contacting him.

Thus, when female migrants need to migrate without social protection and support, they have to take a more active role if they wish to succeed (needing to mobilise more agentic resources) and they will need to knit their own network.

Opportunities

Female migrants have to face risks along the way but at the same time their woman status can also open opportunities. Women may, for instance, deal with a truck driver or even with authorities in order to obtain information or help (e.g. the case of Mercy, one of my interviewees, who was trying to travel with a truck driver). In this sense, women might use their condition of females in order to obtain information or support about strategies, migration routes and employment opportunities.

Additionally, as explained in the first section, gender-specific employments are also structures that will also lead to different migratory trajectories for women or for men. For instance, being a migrant woman may be an asset in terms of job opportunities in the domestic or sex sector, and despite what sex work implies, it is an advantaged opportunity considering the fact that the demand is much higher and permanent: different from agriculture or construction work (sectors to which male migrants have access).

This situation is exemplified with Brenda's testimony. She explains here how she became involved in sex work, changing her original plans of migration in order to save money for the journey to the United States.

My original idea was just to work in Tecún with some friends, but once there I met this man [a smuggler] who offered us the chance to go to the USA. We met the coyote in a hostel; he came in to buy something and we met him. Then I called my brother who lives in the US to ask him for money and he accepted to help me but only from Mexico City. Then the coyote left us in a town in Chiapas and from there we

carried on alone. Later on we met another coyote who is also owner of this place. He will help us to move further on and offer us employment here. So I am working here while I am waiting to move on..

Structural conditions in meso and local levels are set in such a way that the use of sexuality or gender specific employments may be an asset for migrants during the journey from their hometown to the planned destination. However, as stated before, it is also true that women can find themselves in a more vulnerable position than men, particularly when their original plan was to migrate to the United States, and when they lack support from a strong social network. In this sense, structural barriers obstruct agent's actions, modifying or even blocking original migration plans. Migrants will make use of their past knowledge regarding means to migrate and reach their intended destination (iterational agentic dimension), will need to attend to unexpected urgencies (practical-evaluative agentic dimension) and in line with this, will adjust their original plans and motivations (projective agentic dimension).

Once in Chiapas

Once they are in Chiapas, gendered conditions of employments, legal status, and relationships with local people, authorities and other migrants, interact with migrants' agency, leading to different migratory experiences.

In the case of commerce workers, gender is not a determining factor. Being a woman does not undermine performance in the business. On the contrary, women actually have a relevant role at the moment of negotiation, while men accompanying them are normally in charge of

helping to carry the products. Indeed, Castillo (2001:154) addresses that commerce has become a survival strategy for many Guatemalan women; he actually suggests that most of the street vendors and small product smugglers in the area are women.

Indeed, Lorenzo, one of the interviewees working in commerce explained to me that he started in the business through a woman who coordinated a group of commerce workers. This shows the respectful position that women have in the business:

A woman from home was the coordinator, she used to give us products to sell here...and from a product that sold for 10 pesos, we got 8 pesos, and 2 were hers.

However, the case of domestic migrants is different from commerce workers; in their case, structural conditions are gender biased. Theirs is mainly a local migration as well, but the employment opportunities are dominated by women and have a closer relationship with the local community. But despite this close relationship and the fact that domestic work (mainly Guatemalan) is strongly established in the region, migrants have no clear right or legal protection as, for instance, agriculture workers have. The possibility of acquiring legal residence and a work permit relies on the good will of their employer (the process could not be carried out alone, because apart from the difficulty of the process, it also requires the employer's support). At the same time, the legal resources offered to them are not adapted to their particular needs and the nature of their work.

Here Sonia, a domestic worker in Tapachula, exposed to me the barriers she has found in applying for an FM3^{viii}:

My boss keeps telling me she will help me to get my documents, my visa, but these are just empty promises.

At the same time, women working in the domestic sector come mainly from indigenous communities in Guatemala, which places them in an even more vulnerable position. Being a foreigner, undocumented, illiterate, indigenous, working as maid and a woman, puts them in a very marginal position and blocks them from full insertion into Chiapas society (Rojas, 2002).

It is true that besides gender, the fact of being undocumented implies vulnerability itself, but it is different if one realises that sectors dominated mainly by female migrants, such as the domestic and sex sectors, are the most exposed in the region: the sectors presenting higher structural constraints for insertion in the region. Indeed, domestic and sex employment are a clear example of that stated by authors such as MacEwen (1995) who explains that much of the employment taken by women lacks legal protection and labour mobility. Thus, disadvantages regarding gender are added to the lode of exclusion as a consequence of racial, class and/or legal status.

Certainly, in the particular case of sex work, being undocumented and female exposes them to threats and deceit; the same things that forced them to engage in this sector in the first place (as was shown before). Being undocumented, female and sex workers puts them in the most marginalised position within the region; exposed to abuse from employers, authorities

and local people – a position in which, for example, they are obliged to register at the local health centre but are not entitled to any legal protected status.

Gender bias also exists within the agriculture sector structure. Even when it is a regulated activity for both men and women, it has been observed that women are sometimes considered as ‘helpers’ of men and are paid only partial wages. On this, Castillo (2001:143), explains that the ‘enganchador’, that is to say, the dealer or intermediary between the immigrant and the employer, transports all the family to the crops, and considers the participation of the rest of the family – wife and even children – as ‘helpers’, meaning that the employer will have an increased labour force without paying extra wages.

However, it is also true that women can also have a formal contract and is true that work in plantations can be divided according to gender; some activities will be opportunities for women – such as packing or cooking –, while other tasks like cleaning and preparing crops will be for men.

On this, Sofia, a Guatemalan agriculture worker, revealed:

...men earn 58 pesos but women working at packing earn 65 pesos because women are faster. Sometimes women fill up boxes or do the cleaning; because men don't do this, women do. This is an asset for women.

As was explained, without taking into account legal status, employment opportunities for women in the region are in a way, more stable than for men – for example, sex or domestic

work as opposed to construction work. Therefore, it is more likely for women to settle in the Chiapas borderland. Conversely, it is easier for men to succeed in migrating to the United States. While structural conditions for migration to the north are highly restrictive for women, blocking their northward journey, structural loopholes allow and demand women's presence in Chiapas. Paradoxically, however, despite permissibility and demand for women, local structures in the Soconusco and border area restrict their real and complete insertion. Thus, it can be seen that agent's scope of action is restricted.

Nevertheless, in the case of female sex workers, it is noted that despite their marginalized position they are able to create links with authorities and smugglers, acquiring information and potential support, which eventually, if that is their objective, could be used to continue the journey to the United States. At the same time, these women might create links with local people or other better-established migrants –for example, with women able to take care of their children or with a man with whom they can start a relationship and establish themselves in this borderland.

Betty, a sex worker from Guatemala that works in Ciudad Hidalgo, talked about a Mexican partner she had and how he helped her to bring her children to Ciudad Hidalgo to live with her:

...we arrived at Cacahuatán the first time and I started working there. Once there, I met a Mexican and started living with him. He helped me to bring my children from my hometown. They used to live with my mum and now they live in Rosario; we rent a house there. I stay with them during the day and go to work at night.

The fact that women can unite with a local partner, have children and even apply for an FM3 document is another reason to opt for settlement in Chiapas; a scenario that is less likely (although not impossible) in a male migrant. Legalized or not, their residence in the region will strengthen women's social networks via informal and even formal channels; they will create their own spaces where they can support each other.

In the case of transitory migrants, it is worth pointing out that while they are in Chiapas their relationship with local people is different to that of other migrants. The image local people have of Guatemalans who intend to work in the domestic, agricultural or commerce sectors, is not as negative as the opinion they have of migrants that are 'passing by' on their way to the north: "They do not give anything back to Tapachula", said a local person I met during my fieldwork. This image is even more negative when it comes to female transmigrants: "When a woman leaves her household, leaving even her children in order to be able to migrate as far as the United States, you can then expect anything from her", said one local woman with whom I talked.

Therefore, gender influences migrant's agency, diverting migratory trajectories because the employment offer tends to be gendered, relationships with authorities and local people are also gendered, information channels are sometimes different for female than for male migrants and because the risks and implications of the journey are also unlike for women and men. Structures in different levels are gendered; this, in consequence, will lead to different agentic responses for women and men. The barriers and opportunities they found

dynamically influence decisions and motivations of male and female migrants. At the same time, with such actions (where their three agentic dimensions come into play) they also give shape to microstructures that allow them (and new migrants) to continue the migratory process, still in a gendered fashion.

Gendered process of structuration

By recognising gendered structures and patriarchal relationships within different layers (from global to micro), it is possible to assess how agency of migrants takes place within different spaces and levels. It provides the opportunity to analyse how migration of people (and how agency of migrants) sometimes challenge patriarchal relationships but at other times reinforce them (Pessar, 1999a; 1999b) – whether migrants’ strategies aim to challenge or reinforce positions of power and patriarchal relationships.

The fact that social networks and domestic life during migration are not separate from gender, leads us to believe that being a female or a male migrant is a crucial structural condition that shapes migratory trajectories. Without a doubt, evidence throughout the preceding analysis showed that from the moment the migrant leaves his/her community, along the way, and during their time in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, migratory trajectories are developed in a gendered trend. It is possible to come across women that have decided to migrate as a strategy to escape from a repressive or violent household, or men that cross in order to provide economic support to their families. It is also feasible to find women that decide not to migrate to the United States, staying in the Soconusco region instead in order to maintain a closer relationship with their children back home.

Along the migratory route taken, structures set different barriers and opportunities for women than for men –e.g. women face the risk of being raped or forced to work in the sex business, while male transmigrants receive support from their network, which is sometimes denied to women. Consequently, men and women might also be influenced and supported by gender specific social networks from their community of origin.

As the empirical evidence showed, once in the Soconusco region, structures are also gendered and respond to a patriarchal system. Looking at structures at the immediate level, it was noted that whilst women are more likely to settle in Chiapas than men, transmigration is more likely for males. Once in Chiapas, gendered (and patriarchal) structures are also present in employment conditions as it is gender bias: jobs that are considered as female jobs (employment domestic or sex/bar sectors) do not offer the same legal provisions as the ones with higher male participation (such as the agriculture sector).

This gendered and patriarchal trend in migration has an effect on structures within the household and community of origin, employment opportunities and conditions, relationships with authorities, local people, and other migrants, and in general terms, on the structural obstacles and opportunities that social networks and structures at the meso and micro level present to migrants during their migration.

Hence, structuration could be understood as gendered structures that relate to gendered migrants, so that gender influences agency and plays an important role in the direction of the

migratory trajectory. Therefore structures present gendered opportunities and barriers whereas migrants' agency responds in relation to their gender. The incorporation of the element of gender in the structuration model is a step in the right direction in understanding how patriarchal ideologies influence the way migration develops and their motivation to either reproduce such ideologies or on the contrary, to challenge them. It is a good step forward in taking into account gender in the theorising of migration, considering gender a constitutive element of the process.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The term ‘transmigrants’ has been used within the literature on transnationalism to show that migrants live within two or more different social spaces (Glick Schiller, 1992). However, in my study I consider this concept to describe those migrants who intend to cross the Mexican territory and enter the United States, as opposed to those who intend to migrate locally – and stay in the Soconusco region of Chiapas.

ⁱⁱ The Soconusco boroughs are Acacoyagua, Acapetagua, Cacahoatán, Escuintla, Frontera Hidalgo, Huehuetán, Huixtla, Mapastepec, Mazatán, Metapa, Villa Comaltitlán, Suchate, Tapachula, Tuxtla Chico, Tuzantán and Unión Juárez (Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y el Desarrollo Municipal, 2003; Arriola, 1995:17).

ⁱⁱⁱ I interviewed five male agriculture workers and three women; five domestic workers; two women transmigrants and four men; seven sex workers; three commerce workers and one man; three service workers and one man, and four construction workers.

^{iv} Jobs that are normally linked to the private sphere and women’s traditional role in the society are, as Morris argues, “a clear example of women’s association with the private domain and a concentration of employment in those areas traditionally constructed as ‘female’” (2002:184). In line with these assumptions, migration strategies are made.

^v According to a survey conducted by ECOSUR, 84% men and 16% women are usually contracted to work in this sector (Rojas, 2002:97)

^{vi} In this respect she adds that these relatives living in the homeland could generate strong remittance dependency, which might influence the migrant’s future plans or the possibility – or impossibility – of saving money. These ties may shape women’s decisions particularly when a migrant leaves children behind, in which case they may think of the possibility of going back – having the means to do it – or bringing them using the recourse of family reunion.

^{vii} I could say that in the majority of cases of women forced to work in the sex industry, it is after they have left home, and are already on their way. However, it would be impossible for me to deny that there exist cases when the woman is forced to work from the beginning, while they are still at home.

⁸ Forma Migratoria 3 (Migratory Form 3) – entitles the holder to work and live in Mexican territory.