

¡Si, Se Puede! Understanding the Status Location of Women in Transnational
Relationships

Thesis

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By

Melissa Guadalupe Rodriguez, B.A.

Graduate Program in Sociology

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Thesis Committee:

Reanne Frank, Co-adviser

Vincent Roscigno, Co-adviser

Rachel Dwyer

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the power dynamics experienced by women in transnational relationships on the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. For women with labor-migrant husbands, remaining in the sending country brings about notable challenges to the traditionally patriarchal norms of rural Mexico towns. To address questions regarding this population and related status dynamics and vulnerabilities, I first build on prior family, gender and immigration literature and particularly Cromwell and Olson's (1975) original three-dimensional model of relationship power. Secondly, using primary data from qualitative, in-depth interviews with Northern Mexico women, I find that these women whose husbands migrate simultaneously experience empowering and disempowering consequences—consequences that cannot be fully understood without a more complex and dynamic model of relationship power. Indeed, many of these women experience empowerment through new responsibilities and decision-making power, yet also significant disempowerment when it comes to stress and either continued or increased gender-based constraints. Using the three-component model of relationship power, and a hypothetical infidelity scenario, allows for better understanding of women's status locations and autonomy. My discussion and findings contribute to a small yet important literature on transnational relationships and, more generally, the study of families, inequality and immigration.

Vita

June 2012.....Holy Cross District High School

May 2016.....B.A. Sociology and Psychology, Georgetown College

Fields of Study

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Introduction

Contemporary Mexico-U.S. migration has changed from what was traditionally a predominantly male migration cycle to the United States to a flow that has grown to include more female migrants (Garip 2016). Nonetheless, men are still the majority among migrants from Mexico, making women and children related to these men enter into transnational family arrangements. This means that at least one member of the nuclear unit migrates to another country while the rest remain in their home country. The family remains intimately involved in the struggles of migration, even while remaining in the sending country. This presents unique challenges, different from those faced by those in typical family arrangements where the nuclear family unit inhabits a single locale. Migration to the U.S. is associated with disruptive effects, such as fragmentation of domestic groups and higher chance of spousal abandonment and the fear of the development of a secondary family in the destination country (Del Ángel and Rebolledo, 2009; Córdova, 2007; López, 2012). Migration has also been linked to feelings of emotional disconnection and feelings of resentment among migrant family members (Mummert 2009, Asakura 2011, Ariza 2012, Lopez 2012).

Wives of migrants are among the most closely impacted by the entrance into a transnational relationship, but they, and the circumstances they face from involvement in this arrangement, remain understudied. The current study focuses on women who are involved in transnational marriages with male migrant spouses. The findings add to our broader understanding of relationship power dynamics as well as the complex circumstances experienced by women who remain in a historically patriarchal sending

country during their husbands' labor migration. The research questions focus on the kind of changes to power women experience in transnational marriage and how these changes play out in a hypothetical situation. Specifically, I focus on determining actions following infidelity as a way to reveal the level of autonomy women could realistically enact. Past research on these women has focused on outcomes of power and looked predominantly at women's sexual power and the risk of infidelity in these relationships. However, there is little known about the way that relationship power dynamics play out in transnational marriages. While empowering circumstances have been observed for women in this arrangement, there are also ways in which women remain constrained by their roles within their relationships and their roles as women and mothers in society. These locations remain complex as women remain in a patriarchal context throughout their experience in a transnational marriage. I use semi-structured interviews and an adaptation of Cromwell and Olson's (1975) three-part relationship power framework to better understand the meaning of these changes for women's power and autonomy. Examining the processes and bases of power, along with the outcomes of power, contribute to our understanding of the amount of autonomy and power women can enact when deciding whether to leave or remain in an unfaithful relationship.

The Mexican Context

The economic climate in rural northern Mexico is one of high poverty and low opportunity for upward social mobility. In these small communities, individuals often must come up with the funds to build their own family home once they have reached the point in life where they "settle down" with a family. With limited job opportunities that would support both the couple and a growing family (this is not even taking into

consideration the possibility of responsibility for extended family), as well as educational needs for children, families can feel forced to resort to non-ideal arrangements to support themselves financially. To build the finances necessary to send back home, men often remain in the United States for months at a time. Wives in particular are heavily affected by the experience of having a husband involved in labor migration to the United States, both financially and emotionally.

Mexico is often considered a patriarchal society characterized by the historical differentiation of labor market work as the domain of men, and surveillance, caring, and other interpersonal tasks as the domain of women (Flax 1978; Glenn 2002; Haug et al. 1999; Ferree 1990; Ruddick 1980). Here, social convention dictates expectations around marriage and the roles within the marital relationship. Consequentially, some have theorized that differential treatment towards the sexes makes it so that women are more likely to be subject to social control (Hagan 1988). All these factors make the labor migration context across the Mexico-U.S. border important to observe in order to assess the complexity of women's status location.

Migration, Power, and Gender

Researchers have observed that the division of labor within the household is impacted by gender relations, which are often shaped by broader social factors (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, Harbison 1981, Tienda and Booth 1981). Women's ascribed inferior status to men impacts not only their role in the household division of labor, but also impacts their rate of migration (Donato and Kanaiaupuni 2000, Lean Lim 1993). Accordingly, Kanaiaupuni states that decisions about migration are influenced by historical, cultural, and social conditions. Similarly, this applies to instances in which women must make decisions in these cross-national relationships, whether it be about household matters, finances, or work. Male-dominated networks work to exclude women from certain types of occupations and promotions (Reskin and Padavic 1994). Kanaiaupuni (2000) suggests that this could be a similar process through which women are discouraged to be the ones who migrate. I extend this argument in saying that not only do male-dominated networks discourage female participation and performance of stereotypically male-centered jobs, but the power structures at play make it so that women are only accepted into these roles so long as they uphold the gendered expectations, i.e. continue serving the children/ family in the home while her husband is away.

This is only one way in which gender roles are revealed in the context of migration. Once a husband migrates, women are often left to pick up the slack in terms of the needs of her transnational family while the husband, the traditional breadwinner, is away. Women from countries with low levels of female labor force participation as well as low recognition and self-determination, experience changes after adopting new

responsibilities to meet the needs of a transnational family. They tend to experience heavier workloads and increased worry, but may also develop greater self-esteem, acknowledgement of women's skills, and increased economic autonomy and support from sources like family and other social networks (Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007, Sanchez Gomez 2011, Rosas 2005). Women in these relationships can find themselves responsible for tasks and decisions that would largely fall into the male's domain (Cohen 2010, Dinerman 1982, Menjívar & Agadjanian 2007, Mummert 1994, Rosas 2005). In some cases, women turn to hired help in order to accomplish the often labor-intensive tasks. This puts women in a different role than usual where they are now acting as boss to employees performing these tasks. In these instances, having a labor-migrating spouse alters the traditional patriarchal hierarchy and division of labor often found in a small rural setting, such as the one in the current research setting.

Researchers have also assessed the differing behavioral expectations of men and women by looking at how the couple would grapple with infidelity. Hirsch et al (2007) use the concept of Extramarital Opportunity Structures (based on the concept of Opportunity Structures) to explain how extramarital sex is shaped by social, cultural, and economic forces. These factors constrain the extramarital relationship options that are available to individuals. Extramarital opportunity structures refer to the "culturally meaningful gendered physical landscape, intricately intertwined with economic organization" (Hirsch et al 2007). In other words, the way in which gendered expectations are formed around marital behavior in this context is closely tied to the gendered economic structure in which women work in the home whereas men are freer to work and occupy space outside of the home. These gendered expectations are important for

individuals, especially women, to consider as they could greatly impact social status and reputation. Reputation is considered a family characteristic (Hirsch et al 2007). Women must comply to feminine standards of etiquette/ behavior to remain in good social standing. For example, a woman's adultery constrains the marriageability of her children and symbolizes great disrespect for her husband (Hirsch et al 2007). In this way, reputation is a form of status that can spread across the individuals within a family, and sometimes to individuals that may marry into a family. These are further considerations of gendered expectations that inform the way one may react to the discovery of infidelity, or the attitudes one holds when imagining the possibility of infidelity.

Empowerment

Women can face empowering changes as well as disempowering ones when in a transnational relationship. The existing literature tends to be divided, with some studies emphasizing empowering changes (McCarty & Altemose 2010, Navarro Ochoa 2012, Deere & Alvarado 2016), some disempowering changes (Boehm 2011, Arias 2013, Hirsch 2002;2009, Frank & Wildsmith 2006, Salgado de Snyder 1993, Parrado & Flippen 2014), and a smaller set of studies that emphasize that both changes can occur simultaneously (Nobles et al 2014). An illustration of the first group is the work of Deere and Alvarado (2016) as they look into the amount of control women migrants have over their earnings compared to male migrants, as well as the amount of control women in origin countries have over the remittances sent back by family members. Deere and Alvarado report from a national Ecuadorian survey of household assets that women managers (women in charge of the financial side of remittance handling in the country of origin) are a majority of those who own the assets purchased with remittances. This

suggests that there is a strengthening of women's economic autonomy and facilitation of greater gender equality (Deere and Alvarado 2016). Without the presence of the males as competition for what few job opportunities are available in small rural settings, women have a better chance at filling these positions. Increased female participation in the labor force helps develop greater tolerance of nontraditional activities for women (Espinosa Aguilar 1993). In this way, spousal migration leads to empowering changes for women who remain behind.

Most studies I've characterized as "empowering" document an increase in freedom when their husbands migrate (Kana'iaupuni 2000b, McCarty & Altemose 2010). For instance, McCarty and Altemose (2010) conduct two years of transnational qualitative research on the impact of undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States has on women remaining in Mexico. They found that women felt empowered to take initiatives to change their lives by seeking training, skills, and organizing cooperatives with the aim of keeping their children from migrating and to bring their migrant family members home (McCarty & Altemose 2010). Although these cooperatives were organized around skills like childcare, quilting, and traditionally "feminine" skillsets, McCarty and Altemose (2010) emphasize that the act of seeking out training, negotiating contracts, and managing resources are new roles for Mexico women. These kind of changes have been documented in and out of the home. For example, without a husband to take much of the decision-making power, women can take the predominant decision-making role in the home in instances of hiring labor and making other household decisions, such as direction for the building of the home. This is reinforced by the aforementioned facilitation to pursue work outside the home. Along

with these, studies have shown an increase in major parental decisions that would have usually been decided by the husband, who has traditionally held the dominant role in the household (Navarro Ochoa 2012). Much like the physical absence, and weaker social ties, can make migrants free of the surveillance that is usually typical of a small town, women can be free of surveillance on the part of her husband (Gupta 2002; Kana'iaupuni 2000b).

Another set of studies demonstrate empowering changes in the way that women respond to the new circumstances they encounter. These studies show women having an increase in self-esteem along with the new responsibilities they acquire in the absence of their husband (Arias 2013). This is explained by a new feeling of self-efficacy and a new understanding of the extent of utility found in women's skillsets (Menjívar & Agadjanian 2007, Sanchez Gomez 2011, Rosas 2005). Women can now be freer to realize their ability to obtain skills or use existing skills as a means of income. When asked about the hypothetical possibility of infidelity, and what their reaction would be to discovering infidelity, some women respond that they would not allow the relationship to continue afterwards. These women had access to their own wages due to involvement in the labor force and had higher educational attainment (at least a high school diploma) than others who responded differently (Hirsch et al. 2002).

Additionally, some researchers have argued that a husband's migration could result in strengthening of the family and can create the desire to reconnect distant family. It has been linked to feelings of wanting to reunite with family, a longing for companionship, or simply a desire to return home to the country of origin (Boehm 2011).

This reflects an increased appreciation for the role that each partner in the relationship brings to the table and/ or simply the desire to reunite after being apart for some time.

One way to begin to understand the ways in which women can become empowered in the transnational context is through the concept of the “bases of power”; The bases of power explain the source of a partner’s power (Cromwell and Olson 1975, Harvey et al 2002). Sources of this power can be things like money, work, skill, status, and knowledge. In the transnational family arrangement, women seem to obtain more power than they would have if their husband was physically present (Deere & Alvarado 2016, Navarro Ochoa 2012). Negotiating can be done at a distance, intermittently, as a set prior agreement with the husband, or not at all (this is the case if women did not have to negotiate with their absent husband). Being a mother and provider (that is physically present) also harnesses some status for mothers to justify working/ activities that involve provision for one’s family. Without the presence of a husband who may put restrictions on his wife’s liberty to pursue occupations, women are more able to discover ways in which they can use existing (or easily attainable) skills to earn an income, and therefore gain power that would be otherwise unattainable.

Disempowerment

Another set of studies have argued that migration can result in an increase, or perpetuation, of disempowerment (Hirsch et al 2007, Gonzalez de la Rocha 1988, Nobles et al 2014). Researchers have suggested that when the head of the household (usually the male) migrates, there is an increase in family tension that can be especially impactful on women (Godron cited by Chaney 1985; Salgado de Snyder et al 1993; McCarty and Altamose 2010). This has been explained by some as the result of drastic changes in the

needs of the family, resulting in increased responsibility for women (Chaney 1985), while others have linked it to women's reports of lack of support from the husband. The act of taking on two parenting roles in the father's absence can take a toll as the woman may have problems disciplining her children on her own (Salgado de Snyder 1993). Not only do they take on additional responsibility as the sole parent in the home, but they also face the challenge of sustaining a high-stakes, long-distance relationship. Women in these relationships face the stress that is accompanied by raising children alone, maintaining a marriage from afar, and balancing household finances while being highly financially dependent on the revenue their husbands are sending from the U.S. (Nobles et al 2014, Frank and Wildsmith 2005). This is why abandonment can present a grave threat to women in transnational relationships.

Abandonment has also been an area of concern for transnational families since before the rise of the U.S.- Mexico migration flow (Frank and Wildsmith 2005). Women in sending countries are in a particularly vulnerable position as labor migration to the United States becomes increasingly necessary for transition to adulthood, beginning a family, and supporting a family's basic needs and there continues to be lower female participation in the labor market. The concern for abandonment by migrant husbands is present throughout research that has been done on transnational Mexican families (Buznego 2001, Davis 1992, Gupta 2002, Kanaiaupuni 2000b, Marroni 2000, Salgado de Snyder 1993, Stephen 1991, Trigueros 1992, Viadro 1997). Male migrants in the U.S. can feel a sense of anonymity due to their physical absence from their close, small-town (Hagan 1988; Gupta 2002; Kanaiaupuni 2000b). It follows that this could contribute to the chance of union dissolution/ abandonment. Being in the U.S. also exposes migrants

to a different set of normative values in which divorce is far more common than in Mexico, increasing the chance that they will experience shifts in their marital ideals (Frank and Wildsmith 2005; Hirsch 2003). In fact, Frank and Wildsmith (2005) have documented this pattern by finding that Mexican male heads of households are more than two times as likely to experience union dissolution when they have high levels of U.S. migration compared to those who have never migrated to the U.S. A pattern of higher union dissolution is also seen for individuals from communities with high rates of migration (Frank and Wildsmith 2005).

Kanaiaupuni (2000) points out that the increased female participation in the labor force does not automatically lead to greater autonomy and awareness for women, especially in settings where women have no choice but to work to fight their way out of a place of poverty. Researchers have pointed to occupational discrimination as well as wage inequality for women experiencing poorer outcomes than men even in situations where employers prefer females to perform the labor necessary (Beneria and Roldan 1987, Crummet 1987, Garcia, Munoz, and Oliveira 1979, Sassen-Koob 1983, Tienda and Booth 1991). Women's participation in economic activities is often still seen as marginal to income provision for the home (de la Paz 1998, Kanaiaupuni). Lower levels of female participation could reflect higher opportunities for men and may be a reason why women remain in the home. High levels of participation may reflect higher opportunity all around, diminishing the need for men to migrate for the hope of steady of income (Kanaiaupuni 2000). Kanaiaupuni (2000) finds that men are less likely to migrate in areas with higher, compared to medium, levels of female labor-force participation and where female labor force is very low compared to levels of men's labor force participation.

Additionally, women themselves may not participate in the labor force due to the belief that their “proper” place is in the home and because, even if they did choose to work, patriarchal norms may assign men the power over their wives’ labor (Chant 1991, LeVine 1993, Safilios- Rothschild 1990). While poor women have been historically more likely to work, researchers looking at the U.S. have found that lower-class mothers might choose not to work outside the home to be able to care for their children (Edin and Lein 1997, Hays 2003). Both the impact of social norms and lack of resources for childcare could explain this trend.

The transnational family arrangement can be stressful in itself, but the situation is complicated if women encounter additional or unexpected challenges to their marriage, such as infidelity. Infidelity has been documented as a major concern for women in transnational relationships (Hirsch et al 2003;2007, Parrado & Flippen 2014). Women can feel obliged to excuse husband’s indiscretions as migration to the U.S. is seen as a great sacrifice made for the family in order to move them forward. Studies by Parrado and Flippen (2014) and Hirsch et al (2007) have presented women with this possibility in the past and collected data on how women would respond after the discovery of infidelity. Some have argued that women’s lenient responses to infidelity are a result of dedication to an “illusion of fidelity” (Hirsch 2003), which could serve a twofold function by making a woman feel empowered to discuss the issue, but not empowered to leave the relationship in such difficult economic contexts. Similarly, others claim that the changes/ power dynamics that have been observed as “female empowerment” do not occur by choice, but rather by cession of the male (Gonzalez de la Rocha 1988).

Unfortunately, in the transnational arrangement, the power source for women is largely the absence of the husband who would usually lead the decision-making role. Women must still fulfill their roles as mothers, wives, and negotiate those duties with herself, family, children, and sometimes even society. One illustration of this is the way women react to infidelity. In other words, the perceived female empowerment is simply a side effect of the husband's temporary absence, and is born out of necessity by one's family, as opposed to the actual acceptance and advancement of women's status in society. In this project, I collect and analyze information on the prospect of infidelity, a strategy I elaborate on further in the methods section.

Job opportunities are often limited for women in this rural context. Even when women do obtain a money earning occupation, their contribution to the household income can still be considered marginal/ non-significant by being directed to paying for 'inessential' items. However, the husband's contribution could go towards things like the construction of the family home, the education of children, and food supplies.

Women can also face gender-based restrictions in their role as decision-maker of the household even in a transnational relationship. Even in instances where women do manage to hire help to upkeep any resources like land and cattle that the family may be responsible of, they can face judgement and heavy criticism/ surveillance on the part of the community and other family members. This is a way for word to return to the husband even when he is away, as well as squandering the income and skills that could reinforce women's power and autonomy. Underlying these restrictions are stereotypes that limit women's role to certain domains. Stereotypes are ideological bases for gender relations that reinforce the women's roles as domestic, subordinate creatures (Kanaiaupuni 2000,

Fraser 1991). These are evident through several mechanisms from migration patterns to parenting. Kanaiaupuni (2000) argues the migration decision-making is gendered in that the context in which the decisions are made assigns different values to activities and characteristics usually thought of as either male or female. Kanaiaupuni (2000) demonstrates in analyses that show men becoming less likely to migrate with increases in education, whereas there is an increased likelihood of migration for women as their education increases, suggesting that higher status is required for women to migrate.

Dreby (2006) suggests that differences between women and men in parenting is rooted in the Mexican gender ideology that continues to emphasize a woman's 'sacred' role as a mother and men's role as a provider. Dreby 2006: (Melhuus 1996, 230) suggests that Mexican mestizo gender ideals split the ideas of power and value as they value highly the role of mother, but assign power to men according masculinity and highly value women in her role as a mother.

The Current Study

The review of literature makes clear that the existing literature focused on transnational families is characterized by several gaps. (1.) studies focus on the family and often focus broadly on the perspective of several family members; (2.) Studies focusing on the wives of migrant men focus too narrowly on only one dimension of the women (such as their role as mothers) or potential challenges and changes (such as stress or mental health concerns) faced by women in the country of origin; (3.) While there has been some research showing the changing power dynamics for women as they spend time in the United States, these have largely focused on comparing women in the United States to those in Mexico (Parrado and Flippen 2014); (4.) Much less attention has been paid to

women who remain behind in Mexico; (5.) Those that have, largely focus on the varying experiences with ‘transnational parenthood’ and motherhood as parents face separation from their children through processes like labor migration (Fuller-Iglesias 2015; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012; Mazzucato and Schens 2011; Carling, Menjivar and Schmalsbauer 2012; Hondagneu- Sotelo & Avila 1997). (6.) Other research looks at women in cross-national relationships in Mexico, but has focused largely on the sexual power these women have in relationships. This research tends to focus on STD prevention and the amount of agency women have in asking for condom use with their husbands who have returned from their time working in the United States. This highlights the amount of sexual power women are able to exert with husbands who may have been unfaithful in the U.S.

Despite such work, there is little known about the way these relationship power structures would play out in a cross-national marriage arrangement. Much of the existing studies look at women in only one domain, whether that be work, power within the relationship, their role in the family/ in the community, or sexual autonomy/ decision making power (Salgado de Snyder 1993, Hirsch et al 2002; 2009, Boehm 2011, Arias 2013, Parrado and Flippen 2014). The literature has not taken into consideration broader social factors and how they impact women. As noted previously, power relations in marriage may very well be shaped by gender dynamics and money-earning.

The current study aims to expand the way we assess women’s locations and autonomy. I aim to continue to contribute to the prior literature that brings together the empowering and disempowering potential of the transnational family arrangement. In doing this, I expand our understanding of the experience of females who are left in the

sending country. I attempt to capture how these individuals grapple with their status as women, wives, and mothers in the absence of their migrant husbands. Other scholars have wondered about what happens to women's new abilities when migrant husbands return home (Arias 2013). Sprey (1973) and Cromwell and Olson (1975) are among the first to begin to demand a reexamination of our conceptualization of power and the advancement of a more complex (and accurate) concept.

I adapt and apply Cromwell and Olson (1975) theory of power that helps to break down the complexity of women's locations (also see Harvey et al 2002). Seen through this lens, the circumstances described above beg the question of whether even women who appear empowered have gained a true form of empowerment. In the transnational context this model uses three different components to highlight how individuals use their resources to negotiate for their own aims, whether these be needs or desires. First, the outcomes of power are indicated by who gets their way and largely controls impactful decisions (Cromwell and Olson 1975). Second, Cromwell and Olson (1975) consider the bases of power the sources of individual's power. Third, the processes of power could be thought of as the bargaining or conflict that lead to the outcomes of power (Cromwell and Olson 1975). This model uses the three components to highlight how individuals use their resources to negotiate for their own aims, whether those be needs or desires. I will use these three components to highlight the complexity of the circumstances women find themselves in when involved in a transnational relationship. The outcomes of power can be complex and not necessarily signify that one partner is dominant over the other in these relationships. That is why the bases and processes of power, as well as individual resources, need to be considered to further understand the power dynamics of

transnational relationships. Only by evaluating all three components can we assess women's positions in transnational relationships.

Methods

This study is based on qualitative data collected in a small rural town with a high rate of migration within the span of 3 weeks in the summer of 2018. I use pseudonyms for people in my sample and the sample location to protect their anonymity. Therefore, I call the small town Santa Carmela for the rest of this thesis. Santa Carmela is located on the Mexico side of the Mexico- U.S. border, within two hours from Eagle Pass International Bridge 1. I approached 20 potential participants, which resulted in 17 potential participants because 3 women rejected the interview. I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews (in Spanish) with participants. However, I limit the use of data to 16 interviewees who have had the experience of being a transnational relationship arrangement in which the husband migrated for labor to the United States and the woman has stayed in Mexico. The interviews were recorded and stored in a secure computer only accessible to me as the researcher. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed (through both audio and transcriptions) for themes.

The fieldwork I did in Santa Carmela included informal conversations and observations with a prominent family in town, who served as key informants for the whole process, from travelling to the locale to recruiting, and gaining access to, participants. This family was headed by seemingly equally respected couple, of which the wife is a school teacher (who has taught most of the town personally or has taught their children, and the husband is a prominent rancher. I found participants by talking to people attending family and community events, and sometimes also visited volunteers at their own homes. Key female family members advised on how to properly approach and

communicate with potential participants, who later also aided in a process of snowball sampling.

Despite the connections I had in the town and the help I received from informants, migration and infidelity still proved to be sensitive topics. The informant family helped communicate my identity and connection to the town and one of its families. It helped to legitimize my presence and create a feeling of security around interviewing with me. This was especially important in the highly politicized social atmosphere in which local elections were taking place, and the Trump presidency was a distant, yet constant and relevant presence for consideration for many in the town.

I use local government *encuestas* (surveys) and the experience of a local educator's work on his master's degree as examples to explain, justify and contextualize the work I was there to do. This was a way of attempting to express the lack of danger involved in interviewing for this study. Emphasizing the anonymity of the interviews was important and, in 3 occasions, was still not enough to convince potential participants to participate. Individuals either showed open willingness to discuss, but a larger group expressed skepticism and fear that participation would somehow negatively impact legal proceedings, or documentation proceedings for U.S. migration for themselves or loved ones.

A device I utilize to assess women's positions in transnational relationships is to inquire about women's perceived options when considering the possibility of infidelity. Women's responses to the hypothetical possibility of infidelity serves as a measure of female autonomy. The qualitative interviewing, the question of infidelity, and the hypothetical interview model, I have borrowed from researcher Jennifer Hirsch (2002) to

allow us to see how women would grapple with the discovery of infidelity and what resources they would be able to turn to in order to continue fulfilling their roles as women and mothers in this transnational migration context. I assess the following questions: Is this a concern for the women I interview? What options do they believe they have in terms of staying in the relationship or leaving the relationship? What important factors do women consider in imagining having to make these decisions? Would they feel able to support themselves financially and through what strategy might this be possible? Does proximity to the border seem to play a role in perceived opportunity of self-sufficiency? What is the role of family ties for these women? The circumstances and power dynamics women experience in these transnational arrangements, as my findings suggest, are complicated. Women do not face only empowerment or disempowerment. They face the facilitation of empowering circumstances and opportunities, but are still restricted by social norms and gendered expectations about women's roles.

I asked women questions pertaining to their lives while their husbands are away. We spoke about responsibilities and work (in and out of the home), life at home without their husband, public perception, children, and the fear of infidelity. Importantly, these questions were framed to address ideas of power and autonomy. The idea of presenting women with a theoretical question regarding the possibility of, and the following circumstances surrounding, infidelity were inspired by work done by Hirsch (2002) and helped to open the conversation to the resources available to women to maintain themselves financially without their husband.

How men's infidelity is perceived has changed across generations. It has been seen as a reminder of gender inequality, but not necessarily a sign of a failed marriage (Boehn

2011), to a betrayal of the *confianza* (intimacy {or trust}) that women hope would be at the center of a marriage (Hirsch et al. 2002). Hirsch et al (2002) find that the difference in women's responses to hypothetical infidelity is reflective of women's educational attainment and income, or other resources, allowing them to maintain themselves and their children. Hirsch et al. 2002 find that women who are more likely to see infidelity as a basis for leaving their husbands tend to have higher education, whereas women with less education tend to take more lenient approaches, such as discussing the issue with their husband. The option to leave an unfaithful relationship only seems feasible for women who are able to obtain a job and maintain a steady income for herself and her children. Variance in these responses is also understood through the fact that men are needed for a household to be respected and that there is still a strong stigma around divorce. Because some women are coerced into remaining in unfaithful relationships due to financial need, efforts to remain in these marriages are further mechanisms by which women remain in unhappy, unequal marriages and continue to maintain the status quo in this setting. Such findings inspired the idea to use infidelity as a measure for autonomy.

Findings

To demonstrate the co-occurrence of empowering and disempowering circumstances for women across all three components of Cromwell and Olson's (1975) power framework, I organize the findings first into broad empowering and disempowering sections. Each of these contain subsections corresponding to outcomes, processes, and, my main focus, the bases of power. Scattered throughout the findings are quotes and experiences from the lives of nine women I interviewed; Sandra, Alejandra, Consuelo, Luisa, Maria, Soledad, Loli, Mela, and Nelly. Through this structure, I want the reader to observe the way that circumstances can co-occur in the lives of these women and that characterizing a woman's location as simply empowered or disempowered would be an inaccurate oversimplification.

Empowering: Outcomes of Power

According to Cromwell and Olson (1975), outcomes of power include who has decision-making power and/ or who manages household income. These are outcomes of power that women are in agreement with, are altered as a consequence of the transnational arrangement, and directly aid women in achieving their own aims. As my results show, participation with the decision to labor-migrate, the adoption of prominent family responsibilities, and decision-making power are all impacted.

There were a variety of responsibilities women in my sample took on after their husband's migration, from acting as administrator of remittances to caring for livestock and joining their husband (former migrant) in the fishing business. Some also adopted work

outside the home. Sandra, a fifty-something woman with now-grown children whose husband still travelled to the United States, explained the kind of work she took on:

While my husband's away that leaves me in charge of everything. I have to take care of the house and make sure to tend to the animals (livestock) over at the ranch. That's something I never had to do before, but you get used to it because it's what you have to do.

All women remained in charge of educating and maintaining children, and domestic upkeep throughout the changing arrangements. Women from my sample not only had to contend with their roles at home as a wife and mother, but also always be conscious of their role/ norms/ expectations as women if they were to step outside the home. Wives of migrants could face push-back depending on the occupations they would take on, but they were still largely able to control over their own income. Santa Carmela wives of migrants tended to have control over finances or feel that they had a say in the way household income was distributed. Alejandra, a young mother to two children, one 5-yearold and another younger child, explains:

Oh, this is my money. I work here (the bank) for this money and I decide how to spend it. He (her husband) doesn't touch it.... I would say we make about the same (income), but we discuss and make all the money decisions together according to what's best for us and what we need at the time. All those discussions, we make as a couple, as a family.

In other cases women would feel it is fair for the husband to have full control of where the household income was being distributed. Consuelo is an example of this as she keeps and controls the way her small income from the hardware store is used, but had no problem with her husband controlling the majority of the income that stemmed from his current job as a mechanic in their small Mexican hometown. In these cases, men were either the sole, or prominent, income earner for the home, giving the men a strong base of

power. In my sample, women showed an empowered outcome of power through their perceived control of household income. They seemed to feel that they had control of their earnings, and sometimes even the remittances that were sent back, to spend in ways that they see fit.

Empowering: Processes of Power

Beyond outcomes, Cromwell and Olson (1975) identify the processes of power. Processes related to power refer to the negotiations taking place to lead to the outcomes of power discussed above. In other words, these are the processes by which the outcomes come about. Here, I will cover findings on how negotiations take place in these transnational arrangements, whether they be between women and husband, or women and other family and community members. Santa Carmela women remain influenced by their family but have some freedom to assert their own decisions on family matters while their husbands are away. The way these negotiations take place is often dependent on the bases of power. Family is an important part of migrant's lives and often shapes the organization of individuals' lives (Ariza 2002, 2014). Luisa, a woman in her mid 60's, whose husband still labor-migrates regularly after 40+ years, recalls their forty years of marriage:

No, I didn't grow up here. I moved here because of his family. This is where he grew up so that was the natural thing to do after we got married.

Family, natal or otherwise, was one factor women cited as a support in the decision-making process while their husbands are away. This included contending with the responsibility of making parenting and financial decisions for their children, as well as regular upkeep in the household. These negotiations become easier for some women, not only because their husband was not present to assert as much control as may have been

usual, but also because they had the support of their parents in the case of any major disagreements or conflicts.

The negotiations about major household decisions change in transnational relationships. While not all husbands exhibited intense control over their wives' actions and decisions, it is important to note the impact a husband's absence can have for women in these types of relationships. Husbands are no longer physically there to assert power over a decision, mostly leaving women in charge of major builds and changes to the home, especially in the time when the couple is still developing a new family home from the earnings brought in by labor-migration. Much of any negotiation done between partners has to be made over the phone. In this way, women were more able to assert their will on decisions regarding their children and the home in ways that could have been restricted in the past. For instance, Maria mentioned making changes to her home that her husband may have considered frivolous, but that she thought made their home safer for young children.

Empowering: Bases of Power

One of my main arguments is that past research has paid inadequate attention to the bases of power for women in transnational relationships. Here I will present findings on bases of power in the context of empowering changes, which creates a leverage for women to argue for the fulfillment of their own aims. My respondents illustrate that through an increased liberty to use and seek resources, such as skills, work, income, and social support some women are able to see an increase in their empowerment.

Some women were able to list proximity to their parents as a resource to turn to in the case of any kind of emergency. Other resources women could use were education,

existing income from an established occupation, or assistance from social programs. Women were able to use their skills, even if they lie in traditionally feminine occupations (food prep, childcare, housekeeping, tailoring, etc.) to make an income. Maria, a mom of two in her early 30's, was able to run a small pharmacy with the knowledge she had acquired in her time studying medicine.

I didn't finish my training in medicine. I stopped school because I wanted to get married, so it was a choice that I made. I knew enough that [my husband and I] could open this little pharmacy. There was no other in town so we took the opportunity. Then there was a chance for me to take a public class for baking and cake decorating. I liked it and wanted to do more so I searched for more ideas and people started asking me to make cakes for the parties and dances they have here in town. Now I run a small bakery business out of my kitchen that helps us with all our needs at home.

In circumstances like these, the ability to access resources and power are tied to women's freedom to choose to work outside the home, in some cases made possible only because of the absence of the migrant husband. For Santa Carmela women in relationships where the husband exerted more control in the relationship, his absence enabled them to more freely use resources like money (income), work, skills, status, and knowledge to build a stronger base of power. Men's time spent as labor migrants in the U.S. has allowed for some women to escape reprimands, violence, and prohibitions inflicted by their husbands (Rosas 2005).

Even women with little or no work experience, felt that they were completely capable of finding and maintaining a job if need be. While aware that they were in a context with limited work opportunity, women felt as though they could use the skills they had to sustain an income-earning occupation, whether that was through the formal or informal economy. One woman talked about being able to prepare and sell food if she could not find

a position in a more stable, formal work environment. Women were willing to use any skill necessary to support themselves and their children if the need should arise. Soledad, a middle-aged woman who was candid about her life in a physically and verbally abusive marriage, had this kind of experience.

I worked when I was young because my family was really poor... since I was 10 years-old, I worked. But when I got married, my husband would say "why would you work when you don't need to?" He would say I should appreciate the work he puts in to earn enough for both of us.... I would say that I can [work]. I would say, if I had to, I would find work. I would like to work just so I can have something else in my life than staying at home. I believe I would be able to find something I could do.

Soledad's answer suggests that she has the self-esteem and self-efficacy necessary to pursue an income-earning occupation if the need were to in the case that she were to be abandoned by her migrant husband. For the women in my sample, the question of engaging in work outside the home had more to do with necessity and family obligation than husband's control. Women claimed they never had a need to work and instead tended to the home and children. A number of women felt as though, in this way, each parent was doing their part in the household; men working outside the home, and women working inside the home.

Women could cite their husband's wishes as reasons for not pursuing work outside the home, however most did not seem bothered by this and seemed to believe that they were accomplishing their part of the relationship for the marriage, the family, and children. Women felt as though they played an important role in the home, one that was as important as the role of their husband. According to them, they were putting forth an equal effort into the family/ relationship by fulfilling these responsibilities, whether they were contributing to the household income or not. Importantly, even with a socially acceptable reason/

necessity for women to work should arise, they remain responsible for their children and therefore, must consider their abilities to balance duties and expectations as mothers when searching for work. Women in my sample prioritized investing in their children's future in order to provide as many opportunities for them as possible.

Evidence in support of increased empowerment via changes in the base of power is evident through women's responses regarding their autonomy in discovering and managing a hypothetically unfaithful relationship. Participants were asked about what they imagined they would do if they discovered their husband had been unfaithful. This hypothetical helps women imagine the amount of dependence they would or would not have on the income brought in by their husbands, and whether they would have the resources necessary to fulfill their own needs as well as their children's. This question, inspired by research done by Jennifer Hirsch (2002), was asked as another way to understand how much power women would really gain from the transnational relationship arrangement and whether it translated into truly meaningful advancement for women's status (i.e. base of power). Relatedly, as women began to imagine these situations, they also began to imagine the possibility of abandonment and their potential response to this threat.

Infidelity was a natural concern for women in their relationship arrangement, but they did not seem especially concerned with the idea of abandonment and infidelity as a risk for their relationship specifically. Generally, the women that I interviewed from Santa Carmela largely believed that their relationship was exceptional and, while they acknowledged that infidelity/ abandonment was a possibility for wives of migrants, they believed their relationships would not face these difficulties. They saw infidelity as a realistic concern, but saw themselves as almost immune, or outside of this trend. Two

women even reported that they hadn't ever even considered the possibility of infidelity for their own marriage. Sandra, for example had a hard time imagining what she would do in the case that she discovered infidelity from her husband. Consuelo explains her thoughts on infidelity.

You know, I never really worried about it (infidelity). Maybe I should worry and I do worry about it more now, but my husband has stopped going to the U.S. at this point. But when he was working in the U.S. I really didn't worry about it.

Those who did believe infidelity could happen to them and impact their relationship responded in several ways, once again emphasizing the mixed outcomes of power. However, women largely reported that they would not stand for infidelity from their husbands. These conversations began to illuminate women's bases of power by explaining why the women would and could act in the way they imagine. Women reported that infidelity would be absolutely unacceptable and that they would be able to find financial stability by any means if they were to discover their husband had been unfaithful. Some women reported that they would have to handle it in the moment depending on the circumstances and what had transpired. Others imagined they would have to discuss the situation with their husbands and find out if there was a way the situation could be resolved. Some of these responses echo the patterns recorded by Hirsch et al (2002).

For instance, one pattern I observed among the women I interviewed was that while women's age at marriage seemed to predict women's responses, and financial support was discussed as a significant cause for concern, the most telling factor of autonomy for Santa Carmela women was the ability to support not only themselves, but also their children. Younger women who were able to support themselves financially tended to feel that they would leave an unfaithful marriage, but would still need to consider their children. Without

significant steady income of their own, women knew that without their husband's income from labor migration, it would not be possible to support their children's daily needs and education.

Women from older generations were also likely to say that they would leave an unfaithful marriage if they discovered it. In fact, Luisa explained that she would also not be interested in pursuing a new relationship either, citing that it would not be worth the effort to put up with, and that she no longer needed to think about her children who were mostly, if not completely, self-sufficient. Luisa explained that she would not be interested in searching for a relationship after a potential marriage dissolution. However, she is not sure that her response would be the same if she discovered infidelity at a time when her children were still at very young ages and highly dependent of parents. Mela explained that her decision to remain in the marriage if infidelity happened early on in her children's lives, was not only informed by her consideration for her children's dependence, but also by her desire to keep her job as a respected educator. While she had moved to town independently to teach, not due to marriage like other women, separating from her husband could mean that she would have to leave her work and move closer to her parents and other family who could help with the responsibilities of raising children. She did not want to give up what she had worked for throughout the years. For these women there was still consideration for the need of a male presence and authority in the household as a sense of structure and an aid in parenting. This was an issue that women had to grapple with to consider leaving their marriage, even while acknowledging the desire to part ways with an unfaithful partner. Hirsch et al (2002) suggest that women maintain these marriages because they have a commitment to the illusion of fidelity. My findings counter this by demonstrating women's

desire to leave an unfaithful relationship, but also the need to consider their children as a priority above all else and lack the resources to maintain them on their own.

Especially among the younger generations of these women, there was a confidence that they would be able to find an income-earning occupation to maintain their family, even in the difficult labor context. Women seemed to have a strong sense of self-efficacy and value in the work they could do. This was especially true for women who had close female family members (i.e. parents, siblings, cousins) who had experience overcoming economic hardship in the absence of a husband. This could possibly provide a sense that they are not alone while their husband is away. They may feel better supported if they are near their own family or have the support in their husband's family that would make them feel like they could continue sustaining their family in the case that their husband abandoned them, or they had to leave their husband due to infidelity. Some women cited their parents as important support structures in their lives, and even a greater sense of appreciation for family, while their husbands were away, making them feel a greater sense of confidence in their decision-making when their husbands are away. Loli, a mid-thirties mother of a 9-year-old, and food vendor, explained:

I saw my mother work hard. Her husband left, but the rest of her life she taught us that she could find a job, doing whatever she could. She didn't need to find another man. She always found a way to take care of me and my siblings on her own. That's who I think of. Right now I sell food out of my kitchen. I can do more than that. Women around here, some of them have to work even if their husband sends back money, and they don't have time to always come home and make dinner for their kids. I can do that. And they buy from me because they need help finding the time to cook for their kids.

The presence of this kind of support from women in town could be one reason that women feel they could go on without their husband in the case that infidelity or abandonment did occur.

In my time in Santa Carmela and through my interviews, I felt that women are the lifeblood, the glue, that kept this small town running and evolving. They seemed confident in their ability to maneuver their social context to enact autonomy and provide for their children. There was a cooperative of women in need that helped other women in need as their husbands were away. These women expressed confidence that the larger community would be able to see that they remained loyal to their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and women and that they should not be criticized for wanting to exit an abusive or neglectful marriage. In this case, a neglectful marriage could be seen as a marriage in which the husband no longer communicated with the family in the country of origin, no longer sent remittances, was unfaithful, or didn't serve other essential functions designated to the male head of the household. Mela reflects on the possibility:

Why should I be worried [about what the others think]? I don't really care about that. The way I understand is that I do what I have to do. I take care of my kids and work hard. And I don't go around meeting up with other men beside my husband. I have nothing to be ashamed of. So I don't worry about what others would say because I know that I'm doing my part for my family. I haven't done anything shameful and that shows in the way I help provide for my family.

If a woman found herself in this type of relationship, she believed she would not be judged (at least not harshly) for the decisions she had to make to separate from that relationship and best continue serving her role as supporter of her family (children). This seemed to be the basis of many women's beliefs that they would receive the support of their family if found themselves caught in these circumstances. There was a sense of pride and

strength that women expressed when they explained this to me. They knew that there was no duty they had neglected in their family.

Disempowering: Outcomes of Power

This section focuses on the disempowering circumstances women can experience across the three components of Cromwell and Olson's (1975) power framework.

I focus here on findings that show women experiencing disempowering outcomes. These outcomes include experiencing high stress due to increased responsibilities, thinking of the family's future, and remaining unable to assert decision-making power. These are all outcomes that would act as barriers to women's aims of taking charge of their own actions, maintaining a close family and being able to provide for their children and set them up for a chance at upward mobility.

Women report high stress (distance, fear of injury to husband, financial security, abandonment, infidelity, husband's well-being) levels and multiple stressful roles as a result of husband's absence. Women faced stressors that were common for loved ones of migrants, like concern for their safety en route and once inside the United States. After that, women could also be concerned over their husband's chances of being apprehended by law enforcement, especially should it be the case that their husband was undocumented. Nelly commented on this:

*It's hard. I do worry about him. I'm always waiting by the phone. He calls us at 7pm every day and I know that if he doesn't call, something could be really wrong... He didn't go to the U.S. as *mojado* [undocumented], but he could be stopped [by police] for anything. Yeah, this is something wives worry about, of course... and some of their husbands did go over as *mojados*. That just makes it worse. You get scared that he might get hurt.*

Women in my sample reported experiencing several other stressors directly linked to their transnational family arrangement. Part of these were due to the increased responsibilities women would face. Some women had trouble parenting and filling both parental roles without their husband's presence. Nelly, a mother in her late thirty's with adult-aged, and middle-school-aged, children noted that she did not have the same level of authority a man would have in the household:

It's hard to raise my girls without their father. You know, a mom is always expected to be the caring one that gives in a little bit, but the dad is someone they have to listen to always. There's a sense of fear, or something, for kids when they're being disciplined by their fathers. I don't have that without him. I need him around to help me raise my kids right. Right now they're living without that serious figure.

Women also pointed out that they took on responsibilities, such as caring for livestock, running a family business, or managing home finances that would not have been part of their role in the family before their husbands migrated to the United States. Women's roles were mostly traditional (caretakers), and now must take on roles of financial provider, administrator, decision-maker, and others, that they did not have before. The work being done by these women could be seen as another iteration of the second shift as they had to take on household and family duties they were already expected to complete as mothers, but also take on business, and perhaps income-earning occupations in their husband's absence. The role of women in my sample seem to fit this characterization. However, since the women in my sample largely have not migrated and have all experienced the labor migration of their husbands, they seem more likely to take on a second shift when returning home from work than they are to consider labor-migrating to the United States themselves to help provide for their families. So while the new responsibilities taken on by these

women could be a source of empowerment and increased self-efficacy, they could also be a great source of stress and a continuation of exploitation of women's labor.

Other stressors came from thinking of their children and their future potential family arrangements. Women from my sample often stated that there is not much work to be done in such a small rural town as their own. They too held education as a priority that could facilitate upward mobility for future generations. They had a desire for their children to access a better education and occupation than the limited options that were available in their small town. Luisa explained as we were waiting for costumers in her empty hardware store:

Oh, I would love for our family to be together. That would be the ideal, but it's not possible right now. There isn't enough work around here. And I would love for [my kids] to move back and want to be back with their family, but it's really up to them and what they decide for their family. I just hope they don't end up separated [by labor-migration]. That's not really living. The family belongs together.

Women would be happy for their children to be in the U.S. if they were able to obtain a better future, but they often times wished families could remain together. Most women believed immigration was a means by which to move themselves and their family forward. Not all women agreed that a transnational family arrangement was worth the damaging impact on family relationships. Maria, believed that an arrangement where family members could stay in one place and bond as a unit was more important than money and the "superficial objects that could be bought with remittances from husband's migration." Perhaps this was due to her family history and their own history of U.S. migration. Maria recounted that she had had a childhood in which her family stuck together through a number of challenges, whether it was poverty, hunger, or striving for an

education. Her husband on the other hand had had a family that was successful in achieving upward class mobility through several slowly expanding business ventures, from dairy delivery, to running an auto mechanic shop, growing crops and livestock, all of which were partially made possible by his father's earnings from migrating to the U.S. Maria's husband had a handful of brothers, all of which had done their own work in the U.S. as a way to become financially stable as they made their way into adulthood. Maria, on the other hand, had one brother, who had never been to the U.S. and who married a local woman, allowing their family to remain close and undivided.

The women in my study were a mixed bag in terms of participation in the husband's decision to migrate. Some felt as if they had contributed their opinion to the decision, while others did not. Women who did not contribute to the decision were split on how they felt about influencing this decision. One subset of women was disappointed about not having influence over this decision and felt as though this was an impactful family decision that should be made collectively. This is clear as we revisit the example of Maria, whose husband used migration to the United States as a threat, brought out in moments of conflict in the marriage.

It's unfair. He threatens me with leaving [to the U.S.]. He knows I don't like it. I think that family belongs together. To him, it's important that his kids have what he didn't have growing up, but now they [children] just expect him to buy them stuff. That's not the kind of bond I had with my family. A family should bond over things that you can't buy. Now our kids are just going to learn to be superficial in their relationship with their dad. That's not the kind of family I want. That's not real family life. And he threatens to do this to me because he knows it's the worst thing. We get into an argument and it doesn't take him long to warn me about leaving [to the U.S.] again. I feel like I can't win.

What keeps families apart is the rough labor market that limits their ability to make ends meet without U.S. migrate. It seems that women were caught between their wishes to maintain close family contact, and their aspirations to give their children the best chance at upward mobility as possible, especially since these are conflicting ideas when the best chances of upward mobility involves separating the family unit. Even in an instance where a woman made the same amount of income as her husband made from labor migration, her income was used for purchasing objects or services considered *de mas/* (“extras” or “nonessentials”). This was the case for Alejandra, who worked at the bank, making around half of the home’s income, and still only using her money to buy all the extra things (clothes, toys, shoes) she and her daughter might want. But her husband was the one in charge of funding the house payments, education, food, and any other need.

It’s important to point out that, in general, the women I interviewed stated that the ideal family arrangement would be one in which both parents could be present in the home and where the family could sustain themselves and children through nearby occupations. However, it is nearly impossible in this setting. Women felt that it was a shame and undesirable to be in a transnational family arrangement, but ultimately saw it as necessary. Their husband’s migration was an opportunity to build enough income to work on a family home, afford daily needs, invest in children’s education, and all together work towards upward mobility for their children and, perhaps, themselves.

There was a subset of women who seemed almost relieved to not be part of husband's decision to migrate, either because they removed themselves from the decision-making process, or because their husband inherently made the decision on his own. Consuelo, a middle-aged mother of four who I interviewed at the hardware business she

inherited responsibility of after her mother's passing, is one of these women. She had a mix of time spent as a long-distance partner, and living in the U.S. at the beginning of her marriage, as her oldest children were born. She explains:

Well, no, no. I don't want to be part of the decision. It doesn't make sense for me to force it on him because it is a dangerous trip and a big sacrifice to be over there alone without your family.... And imagine if something bad were to happen to them... You couldn't live with that kind of guilt.

These women argued that, because of everything at stake, family separation, dangerous border- crossing routes, they did not want to be the ones to make that decision for their husbands. In their eyes, contributing to the decision was a double-edged sword in which they either sent their husbands into a dangerous situation for the promise of uncertain rewards, or they contributed to their family's continued struggles (usually trouble related to poverty and lack of work opportunities, and/ or issues with establishing their own homes in a context where becoming an adult usually meant getting married and building your own home from the ground up). This subset of women was happy not to have to make this decision and to leave it up to their husband and what they felt was necessary to establish and move the family forward. This leaves women in a location of ambiguous empowerment as they choose to remain out of the migration decision, but still face the realities and challenges of having a transnational family (far from the ideal).

Disempowering: Processes of Power

Findings show negotiations women encounter in their attempt to fulfill their aims and that act as barriers. Aside from providing support, as previously mentioned in the empowering portion of my findings, family could also assert pressure on women to remain in a marriage. Some women in my sample questioned the merit of leaving an unfaithful

husband. Part of the consideration lied in what their family would encourage them to do, or have encouraged her to do in the past. Sol, for example, a woman who is in an unequal and abusive relationship, had a family who would encouraged her to remain in an unfaithful relationship.

Eventually, my parents found out that my husband would hit me. At that point they stopped talking to him for about a year.... I even left (from husband's home to parents') once. I returned because my daughters would ask, "when are we going back home with daddy?" And I didn't want him to keep driving to my parents' home every day like he was doing at the time... Now he doesn't hit me anymore, but... words can be more hurtful than punches sometimes, I think. I just stay now because I have no help. My parents aren't going to help and I know I need help with my kids. So I stay for them and because I brought this on myself when I was really young. The way I see it, it's my fault for getting married so young. I was selfish and wanted to be rid of the responsibility of working long hours and supporting my poor family. Now I can't do that (, leave my husband) to my parents. They would say "well now you gotta stick with it because it was your choice to leave the family home and start one of your own."

She believed this based on the fact that they had encouraged her to stay in her abusive relationship in the past. For her family, this decision was about money and her need to be supported financially. The odds were stacked against them and Sol had limited options on how to take care of herself and her kids.

Disempowering: Bases of Power

I present here the findings surrounding women's disempowering bases of power. That is, the reasons behind, and signs of, why they would find it difficult to negotiate for and fulfill their own aims and desires. These are barriers to resources necessary for women to enact autonomy.

Stress and *Dolor* (pain/ sorrow) due to common concerns of migration / the rural small-town context were apparent across the wives of migrants. I witnessed instances of these emotions in some Santa Carmela women. Consuelo is an example of someone with a bubbly personality. Speaking to her about the risks of her marriage, she used humor to express her dolor (Boehm 2011) in a way that is culturally and socially acceptable. She made light of the possibility that her husband would cheat on her as she imagined what she would do after finding out about his infidelity:

Well there would be a lot of punching... -She laughs- Yeah I would take, I don't know what, and hit him upside the head with it. Maybe my frying pan, gun shots, there'd be everything. You name it.... Maybe even some bad words here and there. But I would fight with him.... -as her smile fades and her words become quieter- And in terms of leaving him, I'm not sure. I have to think about my girls. Not as much as before because my two sons are adults and work now, but I still have a girl in (high school) and one that's barely in la escuelita (elementary school). And I don't make enough here to pay for their school. This just lasts me for small things... Not for necessities like education, supplies, and uniforms.

Maria was one of the few women to open up during our conversation and show a more intense demonstration of emotion. It's evident that the concern is there, and it rarely results in emotional demonstrations like crying. She cried as she thought about the conflict and the difficulties of her marriage and relationship. In one instance, as she was interviewed in a room with a door, so as to seek privacy for the conversation. She was crying at the time that her young son barged into the room. But this crying was not meant to be seen by others, especially her young children. As she quickly answered her son's urgent question about dinner, she stayed facing me, with her back to the wondering 5-year-old. The tears were only for the researcher to see and others were not welcome to experience this expression of dolor and deseo (pain and desire) that existed in the complex structure of her

relationship (see Boehm 2011). Looking back now, it is tough to say whether Consuela would have reacted differently if she had been interviewed in a space that was more closed off/ secluded than her open- air hardware store, in which any overtly emotional response to the interview could possibly be seen by neighbors and passersby.

The tie between autonomy, the need to save up for one's own home/ family, and source of income. The women in my study largely cited necessity as a reason for their level of involvement in the labor force, meaning that the seemingly empowered choice to work outside the home, was not always a decision made by them in the conscious search for more freedom. Conversely, women like Sol, who remain in abusive relationships, were barred from pursuing their desire to work outside the home due to the heavy influence of her husband. Interviews also introduced the idea that lack of necessity is the reason these women have little or no work experience. Some reported their husbands not wanting them to work, but most reported that their husbands' work made it possible for them not to enter the labor force.

Women did not seem particularly concerned with abandonment or infidelity as a possibility for their relationship personally, even though they acknowledged it as a true possibility for wives of migrants more generally. Even though women proclaimed that they did not care what others had to say, there was still a sense by some that women had to abide by certain standards of conduct in order to maintain their place in their social circles/ be respected/ taken seriously as a woman and mother. Consuela explained what was expected of her as she worked at the hardware store:

I have to think really carefully about what I wear in here because most of my customers are men. I'm upbeat and energetic. I like to laugh and joke with others, but I can't come in here wearing

something too casual or too showy in any way because then you'll start hearing the talk. They'll say, "who does she think she is? Look at her over there talking to that man, they must be up to something". I'm aware of these things. I know that being a woman in this town is hard. Everything is watched. I'm just expected to be a good mom and stay loyal to my husband.

The role of a mother is very specific in this context. Women are expected to be warm, inviting caretakers. Women believed that men had their own responsibilities to uphold to their family, but this mainly revolved around providing an income for the household. Women talked about the different expectations put on women in terms of the spaces they could occupy, the occupations they could have, and the public opinion on her behavior involving these things.

They prioritized investing in their children's future in order to provide as many opportunities for them as possible. Education, especially, was a priority for women. Education represented an important investment in the children's future as it was a way for parents to contribute to their children's social capital and potential upward mobility despite their financial circumstances, which in this context are rather grim (Giorguli and Serratos Lopez 2009). Women from my sample often stated that there is not much work to be done in such a small rural town as their own. They too held education as a priority that could facilitate upward mobility for future generations. Women in my sample stated that one of their large focuses in terms of saving or seeking steady income is for providing a good education for their children.

Women I spoke with mostly reported having little or no experience with working outside the home. The few women who did work had children who were older, who could take care of themselves or younger siblings and therefore needed less supervision, or they had a job that allowed them to tend to their young children's needs. For these women, that

meant, ideally, helping their children prepare for the day, being able to visit their children's school at lunch time to deliver their midday meal, and being home by the time their children arrived from school. Women have expressed that not being able to fulfill these duties would make them feel as though they were neglecting their children and their role in the family. While not asked directly about mother and father roles, women were quick to list their role as mothers as a top priority to consider when entertaining the idea of a job outside the home or their response to discovering infidelity. A mother's principle role was as caretaker. Conversely, women eluded to the role of husbands in the household as an authority figure, disciplinarian, and most of all, a provider.

Women in my sample seemed to reflect this as they not only prioritized their children as a responsibility they must devote themselves to, but have also expressed feelings of guilt at the thought of working outside the home. Sandra tells us:

The problem is that I know I would love to work. There's nothing wrong with going and making some money to bring back home. The problem is, I don't know if I'd be able to right now or if my kids were any younger. For a woman, it's important to find jobs that let you be at home for your kids. I would feel like I was ignoring them and not doing my job as their mother if I couldn't be here for them.

Women's income still is being used as supplemental income on things that are deemed unessential. This is so even in the case of one woman who made the same, if not more, income than her husband brought into the home.

Women may consider remaining in an unfaithful relationship because of their reliance on their husband for income. This is important to think about for women in my sample and other women in cross-national relationships who may be persuaded to remain in a non-ideal relationship predominantly because of economic needs. The women in my

sample echoed these ideas as some spoke about male infidelity as almost inevitable and male sex drive as part of human nature. In other words, men's indiscretions could be traced to their uncontrollable sexual urges. Therefore, men could not be expected to remain faithful and were excused so long as he kept his duty as provider for the household.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the effects of labor migration and the transnational relationship arrangement on women's experience with power and autonomy in a rural context with limited labor opportunities. While past literature has focused on power outcomes, this research adapts the relationship power framework set forth by Cromwell and Olson (1975) to dive deeper into the meaning of changes experienced by these wives of migrants. As it contributes to inequality, stratification, relationship, and migration literature, the study examines the processes and bases of power together with the outcomes of power and the way they contribute to a woman's decision to leave or remain in an unfaithful relationship. The acknowledgement of these different components of power provides insight concerning the complexity of characterization of women's experiences as simply empowered or disempowered. Women's responses to the infidelity hypothetical have implications about their level of financial dependence on their labor-migrating husbands. The findings reveal that women can have both empowering and disempowering circumstances and that women.

The findings from this study show that women face a mix of empowering and disempowering circumstances across all levels of the three-part power framework. Women could seem empowered through outcomes of power where they took charge of the remittances/ income being brought into the home and made decisions in their husband's absence. The processes of power in their long-distance relationships can also grant women decreased surveillance from their husband and greater freedom to attain their own aims. This also paves the way for women to build a stronger base of power from which to gain autonomy. Some disempowering experiences were also identified. Some women remained

disempowered without much control over the distribution of remittances. Women could still face challenges in the processes of power if they encounter heightened vigilance on their actions from friends and family, perhaps increasing the level of scrutiny women are under. In some cases, this is another way for husbands to keep track of their wives' actions. This then impacts women's ability to seek resources to strengthen their base of power and diminish their financial dependence on their husbands. Women can at once have a mix of empowering and disempowering circumstances in their life, but a look at their base of power helps to understand their level of autonomy and whether they have built a stronger base of power or if their seemingly empowering outcomes could be strictly due to husband's absence. This suggests that the women's status itself may not improve due to the transnational arrangement. It is an oversimplification to characterize a woman's location as empowered or disempowered, especially based solely on their outcomes of power.

While the findings of this study are meaningful for the understanding of women's location and autonomy in transnational relationships, there are important limitations to acknowledge. The conclusions of the study are constrained because of these. The study was limited by time constraints and factors of its sample size. The limited data collection period made it difficult to gather a broader sample. The small sample size could have also limited the ability to see detect potential patterns based on demographic factors. Future research could work to gain a larger sample size so as to analyze questions surrounding differences these factors. The study does not aim to be generalizable. Instead, it aims to inform theory and advance future questions around the analysis of power and the migration process. It's also important to consider that the research was done in a specific geographic

and temporal context. Gaining access to a broader sample size was also made difficult by the tense social climate spreading throughout the research location, as meaningful government tensions would soon culminate on the date of the local elections. On the Mexico border lands individuals were not only aware of the local and national political tensions, but many times also held strong opinions about the Trump presidency and policy changes happening across the border in the United States. At this time, much change is focused on U.S. immigration policy. These policies present meaningful, and potentially life-altering, shifts for family in the U.S. or attempting to enter the U.S. In Mexico there was also ongoing conflict between political parties surrounding questions of corruption and funds distribution.

I contribute to an emerging literature on the migrant experience that shifts the U.S., migrant- centered scope to that of the equally impacted individuals remaining in the home country. Additionally, the research adds to knowledge of the shifting power dynamics for women in transnational relationships and its meaning for female autonomy. Acknowledging a more complex power framework results in ambiguity surrounding the characterization of women's status location. This has implications for women's status and dependence on male breadwinners in a constrained labor market environment. This dependence is crucial to women's ability to choose exiting or remaining in an unhappy/unfaithful marriage and their ability to provide for their children. Women may experience empowering circumstances on some levels of the power framework, and disempowering in others, but this does not translate into a uniform prediction for women's ability to leave a marriage. The demonstration of complexity for women in this arrangement provides a

new framework through which to examine relationship power for an emerging literature that has begun to argue for the ambiguity of women's status in transnational relationships.

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