

# Overcoming challenges of international migration research: A case study approach in southern Mexico

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## Abstract

An ethnographic case study approach to understanding women's actions and reactions to husbands' emigration -or potential emigration- offers a distinct set of challenges to a U.S.-based researcher. International migration research in a foreign context likely offers challenges in language, culture, lifestyle, as well as potential gender norm impediments. A mixed methods approach contributed to successfully overcoming barriers through an array of research methods, strategies, and tactics, as well as practicing flexibility in data gathering methods. Even this researcher's influence on the research was minimized and alleviated, to a degree, through ascertaining common ground with many of the women. Research with the women of San Juan Guelavía, Oaxaca, Mexico offered numerous and constant challenges, each overcome with ensuing rewards.

**Keywords:** Migration research; research challenges; mixed methods; international research.

## Introduction

Emigration from Oaxaca, Mexico is dominated by males (C. Hernandez, Oaxaca State Population Council, personal communication, February 20, 2008; Lowell et al., 2008; Cohen, 2004 & 2008). Of Mexico's 31 states and one federal district, the state of Oaxaca ranks third as having the highest ratio of females to males—91.4 males for every 100 females ("México Hoy," 2007: 48). As many as four males emigrate from Oaxaca for every one female (C. Hernandez; Cohen, 2004). Therefore, male migration impacts a substantial number of Oaxacan women who remain in their rural or semi-rural sending communities.

The majority of migration literature deals with one of four specific topical themes: the lives of migrants in receiving communities (Hellman, 2008; Hirsch, 2003); debate if remittances foster development *or* dependency (Cohen, 2001, 2004); social networks of migrants and how those social networks serve, abet, dissuade, or challenge migrants (Kanaiaupuni, 2000; Massey & España, 1987); and gendered migration studies of women in a U. S. context (Hirsch, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Parrado et. al., 2005; Pessar, 2005). Considerably less

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emphasis has been placed on migration research that strives to understand women's challenges within the sending community when faced with a husband's emigration, much less, a husband's potential emigration. In general, the literature has often disregarded or omitted the impact on family members who remain behind. Several researchers have addressed the subject of stay-behind or left-behind women (Ahern Bryan and Baca, 1985; Hellman, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Stephen, 2007); none, however, have focused on stay-behind or left-behind women as central to their research.<sup>1</sup> Instead, most researchers and writers use the context of the life of stay-behind women as definition and character or background to a related, but separate, migration theme. The combination of a gap in migration literature and the high ratio of women left- or remaining-behind led to my decision for dissertation fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico. Migration research that incorporated women's lives in relation to male migration, or potential migration, was rewarding, but the myriad of challenges that a semi-rural Oaxacan context presented could not have been adequately anticipated.

An inductive, mixed-method, case study methodology allowed for a type of "bottom up" approach. Research questions were posed within a theoretical framework but with latitude for additional findings to emerge. Empirical details—comments gleaned through casual conversation or open-ended interviews, observations within a humble home or along a dirt path, or opinions or passionate statements gathered from surveys -evolved and emerged from within the context of the case study. San Juan Guelavía Health Center data and documents, posted signs in shops along the street, interviews and engaging conversations while wandering through the streets, and attendance at local events all offered valued pieces to the larger picture. Converging lines of inquiry -a process of triangulation- were the most appropriate for this mixed methods, case study approach since neither quantitative nor qualitative data alone could offer a sufficient picture.

The converging lines of inquiry derived from a variety of empirical sources must be considered within the context of participants' point of view -the "meanings social actors attribute to their social experiences" (Hamel, et al., 1993: 31). The meanings that social actors derive and develop from their own experiences and social surroundings establish the direct knowledge and inference that social actors have of their own personal experiences and that of their social community. Their reality is relayed, parleyed, communicated, and conferred through inflicting meaning upon their experiences.

"Social actors" are capable of attributing meaning to the environment from which they come (Hamel et al., 1993; Bryman, 2004). Empirical details must be considered within the locale—particularly relevant for a semi-rural setting geographically located near a metropolitan area. While not isolated but not attached or included, semi-rural locations offer unique characteristics. San Juan

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<sup>1</sup> The only possible exception here is "Migration and La Mujer Fuerte" by Ahern, Bryan, and Baca, which dates back to 1985.

Guelavía, situated 28 kilometers from the city of Oaxaca, offered me research participants that are protective and insular yet fairly informed and resourceful. They have options and opportunities for work and education for their children, yet are also burdened with limits of financial resources and time available to access those resources. The case study places value on the meanings that “social actors” (participants) place on their *own* experiences within their *own* geographical context. With the framework developed from the broader associated literature and the larger research context incorporating personal experiences of visiting and living in Mexico, an inductive research approach was undertaken and a context for migration research was sought in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. A semi-rural locale, San Juan Guelavía, Oaxaca, offered the criteria necessary for this study.

### **Mixed methods approach to overcoming challenges of migration research design**

A mixed-method approach using a case study design was most appropriate and well suited to the inquiry of this research. A survey instrument of every eighth home in the community of San Juan Guelavía, Oaxaca gathered demographic data. The quantitative data gathered through surveys were supplemented by open-ended, qualitative responses. Survey questions about husbands’ migration status, remittances (or lack thereof), savings, and women’s belief of men’s future emigration plans, for example, were followed with open-ended questions inquiring as to why women responded as they did. The quantitative data allowed correlations by one of three age categories, by husbands’ migration status, and by women’s role in decision making, for example. The qualitative responses provided the richness, depth, and complexity of women’s lives only communicated and told through women’s own responses rather than simply numeric data.

As an example of the richness of enhancing quantitative data with qualitative responses, women with absent husbands were asked if they received remittances and the average amount of those remittances. This data proved valuable. However, asking a follow up question provided insight into women’s opinions, thoughts, and ideas. If women did not receive remittances from their U.S.-based husbands, the qualitative follow-up questions inquired as to why they believe they were not receiving or had not previously received remittances. It was this follow-up qualitative question that revealed women’s suspicions of their husbands—as well as Guelavian men, in general—having relationships in the United States that, they believed, negated remittances.

A second example of the benefit of a mixed methods approach were questions asked of women with “anchored” husbands.<sup>2</sup> Women with anchored husbands were asked if they thought their family would be economically

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<sup>2</sup> “Anchored” husbands is my own term for husbands that have not left Guelavía for purposes of emigration, primarily to the United States.

advantaged if their husbands were to emigrate. The quantitative data showed that women *did not* think their family would be better off. Women's qualitative responses as to *why* revealed that women often chose to dismiss the "economic" portion of the question and, instead, communicated their prioritization of family unity as well as the value that women place on having the husband and father in the home over the likely economic benefits.

The strategy of using a survey that combined quantitative data responses with open-ended questions offered the sought-after rich data of women's realities in regard to husbands' emigration. Additionally, the observations, the casual conversations in stores, homes, and in the streets, the participation in festivals and events, the interviews with school personnel and town leaders, and the eavesdropping on conversations in buses and taxis offered insight into women's challenges with male migration that simply could not have been gained or understood without a mixed methods approach.

### **Challenges of migration research in a foreign context**

#### **Challenges of the researcher on the research**

Access, acceptance, and approval in a rural community in southern Mexico for the purposes of research is long and arduous, a process likely amplified for a light-skinned, middle-aged, middle-class, highly-educated, single, female citizen of the United States with adequate, but not perfect, Spanish. These characteristics were a contrast to the majority of San Juan Guelavían women - mostly dark-skinned, indigenous, of lower socioeconomic class, occasionally un- and often under-educated, and married with Spanish, possibly Zapotec, as their primary language of communication of the home and the community. Living alone and traveling by myself further differentiated and distanced me from the vast majority of the community's women. The valued common ground for connection between many Mexican women and myself was motherhood. Mexican women in any town or the city can relate to motherhood and, from that common ground, many connections were made with communication then flowing more easily, openly, and with enhanced trust.

Luckily, and somewhat strategically, San Juan Guelavía was not a researcher-weary community. I was, on a few occasions, confused with the only other researcher that anyone could recall that had done academic research in the community a few years earlier. This offered a chance to reiterate the migration-related research that I was doing and my interest in understanding how it impacted women in Guelavía.

#### **Challenges of the context**

San Juan Guelavía offered explicit, sought-after characteristics for this research project: an average level of male migration (according to INEGI statistics);<sup>3</sup> a

<sup>3</sup> INEGI, the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática* (National Institute of Geographic and Informative Statistics; INEGI), is Mexico's government census agency. INEGI

high percentage of women who remain in the community when husbands emigrate; and, perceived openness and willingness by women to communicate and share their reality, their opinions, and their perceptions with an outsider. Additionally, adequate access to resources -geographically located near education and work opportunities- was important in that residents would, theoretically, have options and opportunities not possible in most rural communities of Oaxaca. This semi-rural setting, however, also proved to have a negative facet unknown when my research began. Numerous women communicated their concerns for their daughters in regard to the negative influences perceived that the city of Oaxaca offered: drinking, drugs, gangs, and promiscuity.

As mentioned by Bryman (2004), “Cases [settings] are often chosen not because they are extreme or unusual in some way but because they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered” (51). This accurately portrays the validity in choosing Guelavía. Guelavía offers no outstanding characteristics or traits that would appear to make it unique in Oaxaca’s semi-rural context. It is not a thriving weaving community like Teotitlán del Valle just 11 kilometers across the highway. It is not a craftperson’s enclave like San Martín Tilcajete or Arrazola in the central Oaxaca valley. Nor is it one of the numerous, more-rural communities with primarily elderly residents with a few stay-behind women and children due to extremely high levels of male emigration to the United States. During the first several visits Guelavía appeared to match its “high” rating in marginality (fourth of five levels of severity)<sup>4</sup> - not nearly as poor as many rural communities but with poverty as an obvious, noticeable issue. It appeared not to have an excessive migration flow and offered a small array of work-related activities. And, Guelavía is a farming community, like numerous rural and semi-rural Oaxacan communities.

The public transportation challenges of logistical access to a semi-rural pueblo for my research proved minimal -a 45- to 60-minute route which is determined by the perpetual protests throughout the city of Oaxaca- from my humble residence in the city. The advantages of public transportation—the conversations overheard in the bus, the chats with colectivo drivers, and the everyday discussions among those near -offered great insight to life in Guelavía.

While some researchers note the importance of “hanging around” as an essential component of access (Bryman, 2004), I was aware early on of the importance of “being seen.” Being seen - and eventually becoming known, first from afar, then from closer in - proved vital for anyone from outside of the community, but indispensable for a white, non-Zapotec, mid-level female Spanish speaker traveling alone and from the United States. The couple months spent wandering, discovering, and being seen proved valuable in numerous

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statistics show San Juan Guelavía as a community with an “average” level of migration based on a five-level scale. See <http://www.inegi.org.mx>.

<sup>4</sup> Based on INEGI data. See <http://www.inegi.org.mx>.

ways. I was already somewhat “known” by the time I approached the Guelavía Health Center asking for access to their research. I was also well received when I put out the word through Health Center staff that I was looking for responsible research assistants to whom I would pay a small stipend. I was also already known when I approached the *presidente municipal* (similar to a mayor or county commissioner in the U.S.) for “permission” to conduct research in “his” town.<sup>5</sup> Being seen wandering the town, purchasing items in the small, local mercado, and talking with anyone willing to chat proved instrumental in the smooth transition to the more focused, intentful, and systematic portions of the research.

Respecting the traditions, culture, and history of the town should always be an element adhered to and respected. One of the challenges of the culture and respect is the role that gender plays in Mexican society, in general, but especially in a rural or semi-rural town in southern Mexico. Of Oaxaca’s 570 *municipios* (similar to a county in the U.S.), 418 adhere to “*usos y costumbres*” (uses and customs), a semi-autonomous form of local government. “Usos y costumbres” is a governmental system used to elect municipal authorities and prohibit the intervention of electoral political parties (Vázquez García, 2011). Of the 418 *municipios* -each with its own head known as *presidente(a) municipal* (municipal president)- just 18 were headed by women, just 4 percent (31).

The *usos y costumbres* system had, in part, been responsible for an entire municipal government of males in Guelavía with one female in the traditional role as secretary.<sup>6</sup> As in most rural and semi-rural Oaxacan communities, women participated in the health and education committees but women are very rarely elected or appointed to any position considered as having power. To conduct research in a Oaxacan pueblo, soliciting the permission of the *presidente municipal* in a Oaxaca town is not required, but is advised. It shows respect for the power structure and culture of the community. In my case, it also offered affirmation that I had “permission” to conduct research in Guelavía. The extensive challenges of maneuvering through the maze of male administrators to gain access to the presidente municipal (after three visits just for this specific purpose) was worth the effort as it exhibited respect for his position and the community of which he was the head. In the initial visit, the presidente municipal stridently portrayed Guelavía as a progressive, gender-equal, open-minded community despite any mention on my part of any related topic.<sup>7</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> Noted in quotations marks as his own recurring reference to “his” town.

<sup>6</sup> For a rich and extensive discussion of the correlations between the “*usos y costumbres*” system of governance, gender, and women’s roles, see *Usos y Costumbres y Ciudadanía Femenina: Hablan las Presidentas Municipales de Oaxaca, 1996-2010*, by Vázquez García, primarily chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>7</sup> The *presidente municipal* communicated various examples of how Guelavía was different and more progressive than nearby communities. With noticeable pride, he expounded on the fact that many women had run for local political office in Guelavía (which I later found to be untrue). He seemed to communicate stories that he wanted me to hear and views that he wanted me to espouse of Guelavía rather than the likely reality of the town of which he was the head. I understood this

contrast, numerous residents -including the director of a local centre, a high school teacher, and several vendors in the local mercado- spoke of Guelavía as being *more conservative and less gender inclusive* than surrounding pueblos. I eventually obtained a signed “permission” letter -something not required by my university’s institutional review board nor by the Guelavía municipio- that was used during the survey collection process. The letter was presented during the initial introduction to every survey participant.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, it was emphasized that all data were confidential and would *not* be shared with anyone from the municipal government nor anyone else. Only one of 72 women approached for survey gathering chose not to participate. It is likely that the permission letter played a positive part in that.

### Challenges of the survey instrument

During the initial months of visits and being seen in Guelavía, I developed a survey instrument to better understand the women who had experienced a husband or partner’s emigration, their views and opinions on male migration, and an array of related topics such as remittances and return migration. The survey generated socio-demographic data, quantitative data of migration, and responses to numerous open-ended questions about women’s work, children’s education, and women’s views and opinions on a wide variety of migration-related topics.

From a language, culture, and ethical perspective, the challenges of the survey instrument were numerous. The survey required grammatically correct Mexican Spanish, but possibly even more important, it required wording and phrasing that was familiar and quickly comprehensible by the general female population of Guelavía. Two months was devoted to enhancing, editing, and perfecting the survey instrument to meet these objectives. Three Oaxacans -all from rural or semi-rural towns where Spanish tends to be slightly different than in the city- were continuously consulted on the nuances of each question. While piloting the survey instrument I noted how quickly women responded to questions taking very little time to contemplate or reflect or to admit that they may not have understood the question. Extensive time was devoted to appropriate wording that quickly and accurately would convey the intent of the question.

Two examples demonstrate the attention required in formulating appropriate questions that would produce the intended data. First, it would be inadequate and would generate inaccurate results to simply inquire if a woman “worked” or even “worked outside of the home”. “Working outside of the home” would omit many women that combine domesticity with income-producing activities *within* the home -making (and selling) tortillas or tamales or raising (and selling) guajolotes (wild turkeys). Simply inquiring if a woman

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response as related to my being female, from U.S. culture, a researcher, and an outsider. Similar examples are noted in Cohen 1999.

<sup>8</sup> The letter was kept in a plastic cover, a sign to most Mexicans of its sense of importance (as suggested by several Oaxacans with whom I consulted throughout my research).

“worked” would also yield inaccurate or unclear data due to misconstruing domestic work and income-producing work. Inquiring if a woman “worked” could also be interpreted as salaried or wage labour and omit women who generate their own income through self-employment. In order to elicit accurate responses in a straight-forward manner, the direct: “¿Trabaja por dinero?” (Do you work for money?) was used. This intentionally eliminated domestic, non-paid work within the home, field or crop work for family consumption, and work done for other family members without remuneration. “¿Qué tipo de trabajo hace para ganar dinero?” (What type of work do you do to earn money?) was the question that followed in order to emphasize that, in this context, “work” was synonymous with “income.” Women’s income-generating activities were important for correlation with husbands’ migration status.

A second example of extensive editing that contributed to generating quality data was a question about husbands that had emigrated and were not living in the home or husbands that had previously emigrated, returned, and were, once again, living in the home. After asking women of their husbands’ migration status, a follow-up question about remittances was ultimately phrased as, “Usted recibe remesas/dinero de su esposo quien vive en los EEUU?” (Do you receive remittances/money from your spouse who lives in the U.S. [modified for husbands who *had* lived in the U.S. and had returned]). Due to the sensitive nature of questions involving money (with judgment and social issues wrapped within the framework of migration and remittances), the question was verbally prefaced with informal language: “We understand that issues of migration are sensitive and private, but it would help us to know ...”. Additionally, at this point in the survey, confidentiality was reiterated. Appropriate and accurate wording was important so, in this case, “remesas or dinero” (remittances or money) was used to ensure that women who were not familiar the more formal “remesas” would still clearly understand the question.<sup>9</sup> The carefully constructed wording proved valuable as *every* woman answered the sensitive questions pertaining to migration and remittances without hesitancy. Heightened attention and consideration for questions and topics that may invoke anxiety, hesitation, or confusion require extensive piloting and flexibility in order to yield quality, anticipated responses. Appropriate wording, verbal prefacing, and additional language for potentially unfamiliar terms proved invaluable, especially in relation to the challenges of migration research in an international context.

### Challenges of survey data gathering

San Juan Guelavía is an indigenous Zapotec community with the majority of residents speaking both Zapotec and Spanish.<sup>10</sup> A key local informant strongly

<sup>9</sup> “Envios” was also verbally communicated as a third descriptor if women hesitated or if they appeared to be unclear of the question. “Envios” is a commonly-used term referring to “something sent,” but most often understood as money sent from the United States.

<sup>10</sup> According to Health Center data, 66 percent of Guelavians speak both Spanish and Zapotec, 30 percent speak only Spanish, and just 4 percent of residents speak only Zapotec.



suggested that two questions regarding indigenous identity, ancestry, and/or language be deleted from the survey. The woman emphatically articulated - abruptly and unmistakably - that *Guelavía is an indigenous community* and that the two questions were unnecessary - “*somos Zapotecos*” (we are Zapotec). After further inquiry with several other Guelavians as well as other Oaxacans, the two questions were deleted from the survey instrument.<sup>11</sup>

A primary research assistant and two secondary assistants -all with at least minimal Zapotec, at least 18 years of age, and high school graduates- were used for survey data gathering, with my primary research assistant also participating in interviews and transcription. The value of using a research assistant in migration research with sensitive topics proved vital. Choosing my valued primary research assistant to assist in conquering the challenges of research in Guelavía proved one of the best decisions made during my fieldwork. She knew the majority of families in Guelavía, she knew how many small homes existed behind one large *portón* (garage-type door), and she knew which homes were abandoned and which had occupants that may simply be away for the day. Her knowledge of every nook, cranny, alley, and path that contained another family home -some of which would have gone unnoticed to an outside researcher without an inside assistant- proved vital to the integrity of the survey data. Of near equal value, she also offered insight to the traditions and culture of the town that an outsider could not possibly know and would never be privy to. She was a young woman with a studious manner, a good reputation in the town, and was a respected member of the community, all of which became obvious during the first few surveys as she was warmly welcomed into *every* home without hesitancy. My research assistant was literally my entry into the lives of women in Guelavía.

The challenges of survey data gathering ensured by approaching every eighth home -from the town centre outward- and requesting to speak with the “woman of the home.”<sup>12</sup> Greetings were quickly exchanged followed by a brief introduction of myself and my work. Since most women had not previously encountered a U.S.-based researcher and were often perplexed as to my interest in their small community, it was important to elucidate my reasons for choosing Guelavía. This introduction was followed with three components: 1) a visual and verbal description of the *presidente municipal*’s letter; 2) a visual and verbal description of the Human Subjects Review Board letter from Portland State University -with a copy given to each woman; and 3) a brief verbal discourse

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of what it means to be “indigenous” and the challenges surrounding indigenous identity, see Trine Lunde’s (2009) dissertation, “Escaping Poverty: Perceptions from Twelve Indigenous Communities in Southern Mexico.” In the case of male emigration and women’s experiences, opinions, actions, and reactions for this fieldwork, the designation of “indigenous” was of little importance due to the centralized study of all women of Guelavía.

<sup>12</sup> Many homes or compounds in rural and semi-rural Oaxaca include more than one residence or living environment. When our knock was answered, our brief introduction included a request to speak with the “woman of the home” determined by the person or persons answering the door. This occurred naturally and appeared to need no additional explanation.

on confidentiality with reassurance that responses would not be shared with any government administrator and that research assistants were required to keep all information confidential. After agreeing to be surveyed, the research assistant smoothly segued into the initial socio-demographic questions. All survey questions were communicated verbally due to the challenges of illiteracy and, more so, semi-literacy. Women's self-reported data was hand-written by the research assistant.

Since this was a survey instrument and larger research project focused exclusively on *women's* views, opinions, data, and discussion, the challenge of securing confidential, private responses was vital. Some husbands were not working and were present in the home at the time of survey gathering. The challenge of women's responses being overheard by husbands present in the home was overcome early in the survey gathering process by having my research assistant and me entering the home together with each taking a different role. The research assistant asked the survey questions and recorded data. I had the unencumbered flexibility to ask for clarification or elaboration, to observe the women's manner, posture, or multi-tasking capabilities, and to note the home's setting and accoutrements. In regard to potentially interfering husbands, I was able to keep men at bay by playing the role of a naïve, U.S. visitor curious about plants, animals, or construction materials located on the other side of the yard or at the back of the house. This collaborative approach proved successful in that all surveys were conducted privately, fully out of listening range of any male of the home.

The early questions of the survey were primarily demographic; the middle portion of the survey included questions of a more sensitive nature. Informal discussions with several Oaxacans from small towns with experience of family migration informed my decision to politely and gracefully exit the survey data-gathering interview prior to the more sensitive questions regarding husbands' migration, remittances, and the possible abandonment by men who had emigrated and never communicated, remitted, or returned to the community or to their homes. These topics were best asked from fellow Mexicans, in this case, from my research assistant. My primary research assistant conducted the majority of survey interviews and her trustworthy nature, her manner, her apparent objectivity, and her reiterated role as a research assistant with the responsibility of confidentiality proved to overcome the challenges that these sensitive questions evoked. The recommendation by several trusted Oaxacans that women's responses would likely be more honest, more complete, and offer more comfort to women if asked by a Mexicana (without the presence of a researcher who they perceived as quite different from themselves) proved successful. We encountered no perceived resistance or disapproval during the discussion of these sensitive topics.

### Challenges of semi-structured interviews

Shortly after data survey gathering concluded, a snowball sample was developed for open-ended interviews. A representative sample of women with absent, returned, and anchored husbands was sought.<sup>13</sup> Challenges continued through the series of six interviews -three individual and three two-person interviews.

Social research that involves “real people” brings with it everyday challenges and real life struggles of women, and by default, for the researcher. One woman with an anchored husband that I had chosen for an interview became unavailable due to her husband’s recent death. Her husband had fallen in a well the previous weekend at the end of a three-day wedding. Inebriated the last time anyone had seen him and then missing for two days, her husband’s body was discovered in the well that, unfortunately, was located next to the outdoor bathroom of the wedding party’s home. This tragedy proved to be the most dramatic and sorrowful of the experiences of my fieldwork, but numerous less intense events also filled my fieldwork.

After selecting six women for four interviews for the first day -two individual and two two-person interviews- the challenges of time constraints for Guelavían women became evident. One woman reported to my primary research assistant that she had arrived 30 minutes early to say that she would not be attending and was upset that I arrived only 15 minutes early. An early arrival was, in my experiences in Guelavía, nearly unheard of. The interview was reset for the following day, but the participant did not show up the following day nor any day thereafter. Four of the remaining five women *never* arrived on that first day even though my research assistant had visited their homes two times with reminders. Only one woman arrived for an interview on the first scheduled day -one-and-one-half hours late. Interviews proceeded at a slow pace over the next few weeks. With Guelavían women often handling a myriad of responsibilities and my research as considerably more important to me than to them, the lack of promptness or even attendance was understandable.

After several weeks, three individual and three two-person extensive interviews were conducted. Each open-ended interview began with a set of questions but with allowance for related topics as well as expansion on topics of greatest interest, passion, or opinion. All interviews were recorded as agreed upon by participants with no hesitancy or trepidation witnessed. They were subsequently transcribed. The recorded interviews proved valuable in contributing much more than notes could offer. The recordings offered details, additional stories, interactions among participants, clarifications, phrases, and even verbalized emotion and inflection. One of the most notable examples was a two-woman interview that included extensive dialog back-and-forth between the two women and included strong emotions of anger, sadness, and irritation

<sup>13</sup> Three women were interviewed who had not been survey participants. Survey data were gathered on the three women as background information but not included in survey findings.

peppered with bouts of laughter with a lot of crying. The women comforted one another at the times of most intense emotions. The challenges of interview schedules were outweighed by the depth, richness, sincerity, and complexity of women's discussions one-on-one but also between the two women in the two-person interviews.

## Conclusions

The ethnographic, mixed methods approach of this case study of women and male migration in San Juan Guelavía offered numerous challenges: the researcher's distinct differences from the participants, the researcher's impact and influence on the research, the culture of the semi-rural Oaxacan context, the language and terminology, and the sensitive nature of many of the migration-related topics. The quantitative data -71 surveys of every eighth home in the community- formed the essential basis of understanding who women are and much about their lives pertaining to their husbands' migration. The qualitative data -open-ended survey responses, semi-structured interviews, numerous causal conversations and informal interviews, and many months of participation and observation in the town- enriched the results and findings of women's experiences, opinions, and perceptions of men's emigration. The challenges were vast in this ethnographic-based empirical study in vast part due to the challenges of working in an international environment with "social actors" quite different from myself, but therein lies the reward. The challenges and blockages instituted by a range of actors within any research project -often including the researcher herself- were conquered in striving to understand and accurately interpret Guelavían women's opinions, thoughts, ideas, passions, and experiences. The social actors that play the central role in an international context of migration research lay out a minefield of challenges -gender issues, cultural construct differences, language challenges, and meaning interpretation- that can all be overcome, conquered, and valued through determination, compassion and empathy, fortitude, and sensitivity.

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