

# The value, costs, and meaning of transnational migration in rural Oaxaca, Mexico

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## Abstract

Rural Oaxacan migrants are defined as quintessential transnational movers, people who access rich social networks as they move between rural hometowns in southern Mexico and the urban centers of southern California. The social and cultural ties that characterize Oaxacan movers are critical to successful migrations, lead to jobs and create a sense of belonging and shared identity. Nevertheless, migration has socio-cultural, economic and psychological costs. To move the discussion away from a framework that emphasizes the positive transnational qualities of movement we focus on the costs of migration for Oaxacans from the state's central valleys and Sierra regions.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; identity; households; Mexico

Rural Oaxacan migrants are defined as quintessential transnational movers in the anthropological literature (Cohen 2001; Kearney 2000; Stephen 2007). Building upon the pioneering work of Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1994), anthropologists argue that Oaxacan migrants construct and depend upon social networks that cross international borders and boundaries and link rural hometowns to urban centers in southern California (and see Brettell 2003; Faist 2000; Massey, et al. 1994). These networks aid migrants as they settle and seek employment in the US (Portes, et al. 2002) and embed the migrant in a familiar shared identity (Levitt 2001; Nolin 2002; Rouse 1995). In the social universe of US based receiving communities, a universe that tends to discount and even criminalize the value and worth of migrants; transnational space becomes a setting where migrants are able to transcend negative concepts of their value and worth. They can voice concerns and critique their sending state even as their receiving community and nation become a new home (Fitzgerald 2006; Friedman 1994; Mendoza 2006; Pantoja 2005; Smith 1998; Stephen 2007; Velasco Ortiz 2005; Waldinger, et al. 2008).

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## TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION IN RURAL OAXACA

A focus on transnational migration typically emphasizes the positive, long lasting and strong cultural, economic, political and social links that are created between sending and receiving communities and their members. Nevertheless, movement and transnationalism comes with costs that range from the socio-cultural to psychological as well as the economic. In this paper we focus on both value and costs of migration as a way to evaluate transnational outcomes for movers and for sending and receiving communities.

### **Oaxacan migration**

Oaxacans have traveled to the US since the 1930s and migration grew rapidly in 1990s and following the nation's economic crises. By the year 2000, an average of 44% of a central valley community's households included migrants as members, and in the sierra, we estimate upwards of 50% of most communities had left for an internal destination or the US (and see INEGI 2005; Sanchez 2007). While the overall number of Oaxacans in the US remains small (INEGI, 2001a estimated that Oaxacans were perhaps no more than 4%) understanding their movement is critical as we develop a model of Mexican migration. Our data comes from research carried out over the last decade and focused on migration in the state's central valleys (Cohen 2004) and the sierra (Rios 2007). In the central valleys, Cohen collected data on migration and remittance practices in 12 communities (Cohen 2004) and recent work on migration and civil unrest (Cohen 2007). Rios conducted ethnographic research with Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, California and Sierra communities in 2003-2007 (Rios 2008).

Men and women who migrate from Oaxaca (regardless of region) are generally young – men are typically 21 years of age while women are usually one year younger.<sup>1</sup> Most young male migrants are married and use their time in the US to earn the resources necessary to outfit their households with basic consumer goods and cover the costs of weddings and the education of children. Young women who migrate are not often married; rather, they are the daughters and sisters of migrants and bring their role as homemakers with them. Migrant households are slightly larger than the

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<sup>1</sup> The relatively late exit date of most Oaxacan migrants means that a majority of them had spent about 1 year in the US when we interviewed them. While stays in the US average a good bit longer (just under 9 years), the mode (1 year) reflected the new qualities of the large flow of migrants out of Oaxaca. We assume that the average years in the US will increase.

norm for the area with most including 6 or more members (Cohen 2004).

Migrants return remittances quite regularly to their sending households and a recent study by INEGI estimates that nearly 80% of Oaxaca's households depend on these remittances for survival (INEGI 2001b). We found that typically 70% of all remittances go to cover household expenses. Remittances rates are quite different for men and women who have migrated to the US from Oaxaca. Young women return an average of \$260US per month while men returned \$540US. Women remitted more regularly than did men. Over time, we found that a woman's remittances tended not to decline while a man's remittances would often decline or disappear particularly when he established a family in the US (Rios 2008).

It is easy to assume that Oaxacan communities are fairly homogeneous when focused on rural villages, their citizens and their lack of infrastructure and economic opportunities (Cohen and Rodriguez 2005; DIGEPO 1999). In such a setting nearly everyone looks poor. But sending communities and their households vary economically, ethnically and geographically. They include mestizo and indigenous villages and range from small isolated agrarian settlements in the sierra where populations are often under 1000 individuals to much larger, urban craft producing towns tied to global tourism as well as bedroom communities near Oaxaca City.

Even with these differences rural Oaxacan communities face a series of shared challenges. The local labor market is limited and a majority of area households do not make a living wage (INEGI 2001a); approximately 50% of the adult population has not completed primary school; and only 23% of the state's population has direct access to health care (INEGI 2002). Finally, even with the *tres por uno* program, Federal funding for the development of local infrastructures is lacking (Lopez-Cordova 2006; Moctezuma Longoria 2003; VanWey, et al. 2005; Zamora 2005). Where funds are available for development geography and transportation, a lack of planning, poor management and corruption lead to the premature collapse of most projects. Migration is one of the few avenues to wages that cover costs, and while transnational connections become an important foundation for success, they also bring costs.

### **Costs of migration-sending perspectives**

The decision to migrate is not made in a vacuum, nor does it only reflect external pull factors (in this case, the market for Mexi-

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can labor in the US). The decision to migrate reflects the abilities of the individual mover, a household's resources, a community's history and regional patterns of movement as well as the push and pull of macro economic processes (Cohen 2004; Conway and Cohen 1998; Hahn and Klute 2007; Massey, et al. 1998).

A range of factors influence the costs and benefits of movement for an individual migrant including gender, education and ability, age and marital status. Gender is critical to migration outcomes. Most Oaxacan migrants are men (nearly 80% of all movers from the central valleys are men) and Oaxacan women are under intense pressure not to migrate. Women migrate there is a sense that they should move internally to a destination within Mexico and where co-familars have settled. Internal movement is more balanced, with men making up just over 50% the total number of migrants destined for other parts of Mexico (Cohen, et al. 2008).

When a woman's migration takes her across the border, Oaxacans argue she should follow her father or brother to protect both her safety and honor. A typical path for a young woman has her following her father or brother and entering the US as a worker, but a worker who continues her role dual role as a worker and a household manager.

Age and marital status also have a bearing on migration outcomes for movers. Younger, unmarried men who migrate as members of nuclear families follow paths that are different from those of older, married men and single men who lack or have few social ties—or men who ignore ties. Young, unmarried men migrate as members of parental households with the support of those households. Married men cross the border for their new families and often turn to extended family for support. Single men who lack ties or reject those ties must organize resources to migrate independent of family or friends. We found that financial support for a migration was three times more likely for the migrant with family involved in decision making and when the migrant intended to return to Oaxaca and remitted regularly.

The increasing expense of border crossing (even as it has become more dangerous) can run to the thousands of dollars. Young men, moving as children of a sending household and married men moving with the goal of maintaining their households have a wider network of financial support to turn then do men who cross the border with few relatives. Single men who lack support often go into debt as they migrate and take loans to cover their border crossings.

The stress of migration varies for different movers. Young men who move as children and remit to their parents complain that they lack autonomy and cannot follow their desires or secure their own future—rather their efforts are for their parents. Nevertheless there are benefits for these young movers. The costs of border crossing are spread among members of the household, they have access to a family and household's social connections and a built in social safety net at the point of destination. These advantages are sometimes not enough and we found that young men, and sometimes young women, severed ties to families in Oaxaca and focus on their lives in the US. In these situations, there are also costs involved for the sending household. Not only does the household lose critical remittances, it may also lose touch with a child. The social costs of such a break are high, as the sending household loses individuals who can participate in local community social hierarchies.

The married migrant relies upon his social networks to support his move and typically crosses the border to find work that will cover specific expenditures. Typically, the migrant wants to use his time in the US to earn the funds necessary for home building, the purchases of major appliances and/or cars, and the education of his children.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of remittances go to household maintenance and covering the costs of living on a daily basis. When remittances go to family maintenance rather than homebuilding, the purchase of domestic items or business start up the fall out can be intense. Often times families will fight over what a migrant assumes are the misuse of remittances by those members of the household he or she has left behind. Intense disagreements lead to separations and sometimes divorce.

This situation is difficult for husbands and wives. A wife who is left behind by a migrating spouse has a home to maintain and children to feed, cloth, entertain and educated (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kanaiaupuni 2000). Yet, she is on her own, her time is limited and she often divides her efforts between home and work—a difficult situation. In addition, she has the burden of managing remittances. While together she may have planned to save remittances, the reality is that most families in the central valleys and sierra cannot survive without some remittances going to household expenses. Some women cope with declining incomes by

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra migrants tend to purchase vehicles, while in the valley vehicles are not often a goal of migration. This may have to do with the presence of transportation in the valleys while the sierra is quite a bit more difficult to move in and out of.

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returning to their natal homes and settling with parents or siblings while their spouses travel and work. In one example, a man told his wife he was planning to leave for the US. She responded, telling him that he had to choose between his home in Oaxaca and his home in the US. While the money was important, she did not want to see her husband leave again. This public argument ended when the man decided to stay and return to farming while the woman continued to sell tortillas and vegetables.

Education and ability also influence migration decisions. While nearly all central valley migrants destined for the US shared an average of about 6 years of primary education, those few migrants with advanced education tended to find better paying jobs. Migrants with more education tended to stay in Mexico where they could use their advanced degrees (see Cohen 2004). For these migrants, education and ability translate to higher incomes and security – there is no need to cross the border and instead the individuals and their families enter a middle class life. In the US a migrant's ability and talent can lead to job security and higher wages. The talented migrant tends to better embed him or herself in her new setting, but perhaps more importantly, talent and ability translate to steady work, a regular paycheck and an opportunity for advancement and support not only within the migrant community but from non-Oaxacan and non-Mexican employers.

A household's resources are organized around internal and external resources (including individual's talent and innate ability) that underlie their bargaining power and monetary as well as nonmonetary contributors to the household's welfare (Conway and Cohen 1998: 30). Internal resources can be flexible (including an individual's status) or fixed (physical resources such as land holdings, savings and goods). External resources include a household's influence and contact with other households, its community standing, and its community investments.

Social status correlates with migration success. The successful migrant household exhibits a strong record of civil service much like the record that characterizes a well connected non-migrant household. Nevertheless, migration does not enhance the social standing of lower status households. While a low status household typically has a history of consistent community service over time, migration and remittances by migrants do not translate to an increase in status. In fact, low status households are sometimes stressed by migration as they lose workers across the border and the remittances returned do not fully cover for the loss.

Beyond the individual and the household, a community's location and history as well as the history of regional movement in an area also influences migration decisions and outcomes. Central valley communities have a long history of migration, yet until the mid 1990s movement to the US involved a small portion of any community's population. Oaxacans, in general, were not and remain at present, a small portion of the overall Mexican population in the US. Oaxacans who do migrate tend to travel to similar destinations (Nangengast, et al. 1992; Runsten and Kearney 1994; Stuart and Kearney 1981). Communities with a history of movement typically benefit from that history as new movers enter a more mature migrant stream. In other words, new sojourners benefit from the experiences of earlier movers and the overall cost of movement declines (Massey, et al. 1998; Massey and Garcia 1987).

The local context of culture, movement, and work also influences outcomes. Central valley Oaxacans have the opportunity to split their efforts between local circuit moves, internal migration and migration to external destinations. Communities in more remote regions of the state, regions that lack regional labor markets or access to nearby labor markets have few alternatives for local labor and thus send migrants to the US. Central valley Oaxacans, like nearly all Oaxacans, face a great deal of internal discrimination and bigotry. But within the state, indigenous communities face an additional layer of discrimination as mestizos and urban Oaxacans treat rural speakers of Zapotec, Mixtec and the like as less able to succeed. For these Oaxacans traveling to the US is an important way to escape local discrimination (although it often means encountering a new discrimination based largely on a pan-Mexican identity in the US).

### **Conclusions**

There is a belief that transnational migration should build toward positive outcomes—strong social networks, culturally viable traditions that are carried to new settings and political activism that while rooted in a receiving community can help the sending community maintain itself and perhaps even grow. Our examples suggest that while these outcomes are evident, they should not be expected and there are economic, psychological and social costs to transnational movement.

There is clear evidence that Oaxacan migration succeeds because of the strong social networks that exist among migrants in their destination community and those rural folk who remain in the central valley. The growing affordability of cell phones and

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computers and the increased ease with which money can be transferred build upon those successes and strengthen those networks. Even after a generation or two, social networks remain strong and the children and grandchildren of Oaxacans who were born and raised in the US talk about their "hometowns" and support their villages and communities (Rios 2008). Thus, the social bonds between US and Oaxaca create and recreate cultural beliefs, foster political discussions, support political independence and the local costs of development as communities improve electrical grids, sewer systems and gain access to potable water.

Transnational migration brings costs to movement for individuals, their households and their communities. First, differences of gender, age, marriage status, education and ability all influence outcomes. Not all migrants are created equal and because of that some suffer. Women face a very different set of issues than do men as they think about migration, educational success opens opportunities internally that international migrants do not have and age, marital status and ability all influence outcomes, frame the use of remittances and have profound effects on a person's mental health.

In their study of the experiences of Armenian and Guatemalan women whose husbands migrate, Menjivar and Agadjanian, look not only at the empowerment women gain, but also the incredible hardships created as women run their households independently (Menjivar, et al. 1998). The burdens placed on women running the household while maintaining delineated gender roles develops what Menjivar and Agadjanian recognize to be unequal benefits of migration. It is the dichotomy of balancing household responsibilities and maintaining the patriarchy that leads to "averse circumstances" that compromise the emotional health and welfare and ability to manage in everyday life not only of the individual but can affect the community and society as well (Norris, et al. 2008).

Thus, gender, the structure of the household, a household's wealth and the work history of its members all contribute to the success of migration and the engagement of its members in other transnational activities. Poorer households, single women and non-migrants lack strong social networks and have less complex records of community services do not participate in the creation of transnational communities. Instead they remain on a community's periphery while successful, strongly situated households with histories of service and surplus resources (whether economic or social) succeed.



Oaxacans in the 1990s were generally new movers who relied upon their networks to succeed. In the late 1990s, migration from Oaxaca grew as an option and there were new opportunities to work but also to celebrate being Oaxacan. While there were costs associated with migration, generally, these costs appeared outweighed by the benefits of movement. By the later years of the first decade of this new century, the advantages of migration are not so clear for Oaxacans. We believe we must reorient our models to take account of the values but also the costs of movement if our goal is to understand the structure, nature and meaning of transnational migration.

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