

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Social Science &amp; Medicine

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed)

## After spouses depart: Emotional wellbeing among nonmigrant Mexican mothers

Jenna Nobles<sup>a, \*</sup>, Luis Rubalcava<sup>b</sup>, Graciela Teruel<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Wisconsin, 8128 Sewell Social Sciences, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706, United States

<sup>b</sup> Centro de Analisis y Medicion del Bienestar Social A.C., Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economicas A.C, Mexico

<sup>c</sup> Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Mexico  
Migration  
Transnational families  
Emotional health

### ABSTRACT

Nonmigrant family members play a central role in facilitating Mexico-U.S. migration by maintaining families, sustaining social relationships, and overseeing household economic organization in sending communities. This study investigates changes to the emotional wellbeing of nonmigrant mothers when their partners reside in the United States. We hypothesize that partner migration affects mothers' wellbeing through three pathways: directly via the toll of spousal separation, and indirectly via changes to the economic profile of the sending household and through changes to mothers' household responsibilities. We test these relationships using data on 2813 mothers aged 18–44 in 2002 and measured in three waves (2002, 2005, 2009) of the Mexican Family Life Survey. We employ a fixed-effect estimation strategy that improves causal attribution of women's wellbeing to spousal residential location. We find evidence of increases in some forms of distress—sadness, crying, difficulty sleeping—when spouses are in the United States but no meaningful increase in depressive symptomatology. Though partner emigration shifts several aspects of women's lives in sending households, changes to household resources or time allocation do not account for the moderate shifts in emotional distress associated with spousal absence. Importantly, additional tests reveal that we *would* observe large and significant associations between spousal migration and mothers' emotional wellbeing using a less rigorous estimation strategy, raising caution about the interpretation of cross-sectional studies evaluating wellbeing in sending homes.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

The institution of family is central to understanding the processes driving and resulting from migration behavior. Migration decisions are often organized within family relationships (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Parreñas, 2005) and the implications of migration are widely believed to operate through the social connections, economic transfers, and caregiving functions embedded in families (Levitt, 2001; McKenzie, 2005).

Increasingly, research documents the instrumental role of nonmigrants in facilitating movement among family members. Several studies show how migration among partnered men and women is made possible by their nonmigrant spouses' efforts to oversee household finances, sustain the family's social ties, and ease family transitions for children (Pribilski, 2004; Kanaiaupuni, 2000b). Despite attention to the critical role played by nonmigrant partners, a small body of research documents the effects of

family migration on these partners' wellbeing. The experience of family separation likely influences many elements of welfare, including mental and physical health outcomes. Shifts in living arrangements and attendant changes in family responsibilities have known implications for emotional distress, depression, and fatigue (Cooper et al., 2009; Alegria et al., 2007; Grzywacz et al., 2006; Osborne et al., 2012). When the couples under consideration are parents, the effects of migration on nonmigrant partners may also have indirect implications for children (Creighton et al., 2009; Dreby, 2010).

These relationships are particularly relevant for flows like those linking Mexico and the United States, in which migration is not limited to late adolescence and in which migrants maintain meaningful social and economic connections to sending families. As this study will show, 1 in 25 partnered women in Mexico had a spouse living in the U.S. during the mid-2000s.

What does migration mean for nonmigrant partners? Most research in Mexico describes changes in the lives of women, who are more often the nonmigrant partner when one member of a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [jnobl@ssc.wisc.edu](mailto:jnobl@ssc.wisc.edu) (J. Nobles).

couple migrates. Research findings are mixed. Some studies suggest that spousal migration exacerbates psychological distress, increases housework, increases social isolation, and worsens sleep (Dreby, 2010; Kanaiaupuni, 2000b; Salgado de Snyder, 1993). Others note that some strained marriages are improved by distance and that some women experience increased autonomy in their partners' absence (Echegoyén Nava, 2013a).

This study focuses on emotional wellbeing among nonmigrant mothers. Because these women are often primary caregivers for children, the experience of distress may have broader implications for the sending household. Adults suffering even mild forms of psychological and emotional distress demonstrate lowered work productivity and raise children with increased risk of deficits in nutritional intake, general health status, and educational attainment (e.g., Campbell et al., 2007; Das et al., 2007). As such, the links between migration and resource-improvement in sending households depends in part on how nonmigrant caregivers fare in their partners' absence.

Drawing from previous research, we propose that spousal migration affects emotional health among nonmigrant mothers through at least three pathways: directly because of the emotional costs of partner separation, and indirectly through changes to the economic profile of sending households and changes to caretaking and household management responsibilities. We test these hypotheses using prospective data from repeated in-person surveys of a nationally-representative sample of Mexican households. Because male migration is more common than female migration after family formation in Mexico, we focus this analysis on couples in which men emigrate and women do not. We revisit this decision in the final section of the study.

The investigation makes several contributions to existing research. Studying the effects of migration on nonmigrants provides an important complement to the much larger body of research on health among migrants in receiving destinations. Ascertaining the broader implications of migration flows requires attention to the welfare of persons in sending communities. Second, most research on the mental health implications of migration is cross-sectional. It is difficult to ascertain whether observed associations arise because of migration or because of something else that causes migration. Prospective data improve our ability to attribute variation in emotional health to migration itself. As we will demonstrate, the approach has implications for the interpretation of existing findings on the subject. Further, we draw from data that include information about multiple dimensions of life in sending households. As such, we also assess changes to aspects of nonmigrants' lives that are hypothesized to be proximate causes of emotional health during spousal absence. Finally, because nonmigrant mothers are the primary caretakers of children in sending households, the findings shed light on a set of pathways through which father migration may influence children's wellbeing.

## 1. Gender, family, and Mexico-U.S. Migration

The circular flows between Mexico and the U.S. are large and well-studied. By the mid-2000's, 600,000 migrants crossed the Mexico-U.S. border each year. After 2006, emigration slowed, dipping to approximately 150,000 migrations in 2011 (Passel et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the Mexico/U.S. corridor remains the largest international population movement in the world; currently, twelve million U.S. residents are Mexican emigrants (World Bank, 2011).

Mexican emigration spans late adolescence and mid-adulthood and often takes place in the course of family building (Lindstrom and Giorguli Saucedo, 2007). As such, a growing literature investigates how families negotiate these transitions and maintain connection, partnership, and caregiving across borders (Boehm,

2008; Dreby, 2010; Hirsch, 2003; Mancillas and Rodríguez, 2009, and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Many families adopt a "divided household" strategy, in which men migrate to the U.S. to seek employment while women stay in Mexico to raise children and care for extended family—an arrangement reflective of gendered parenting responsibilities in some Mexican homes (Arias, 2013; Kanaiaupuni, 2000a). This arrangement is decreasingly common; women presently comprise 42% of flows. Nevertheless, women are still more likely to depart before forming families (Cerruti and Massey, 2001; Fry, 2006) and as such, within couples, men are more commonly the absent migrant partner. These absences are decreasingly "temporary"; because of mounting physical and political barriers to border-crossing, family separation may last several years (Dreby, 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002).

Some evidence suggests these experiences translate into measurable shifts in welfare for nonmigrant family members. For example, several studies describe negative effects on children's schooling, health, and access to resources (e.g., Antman, 2011; Creighton et al., 2009; Schmeer, 2009). As a result, scholars have called for research on the proximate causes of these deficits. Wellbeing among nonmigrant caregivers is one candidate explanation. The shift in family responsibilities, the change in parental authority, and the short-run income costs of a migrant's departure are hypothesized to influence children's access to stable parenting environments (Heymann et al., 2009; McKenzie, 2005).

Indeed, spousal migration generates both opportunities and challenges for nonmigrant parents. We highlight a few such changes here, but see Arias (2013) and Antman (2013) for extended reviews. U.S. migration can significantly shift the level of economic resources available to sending households, both positively and negatively. Initially, financing a trip may require indebtedness to extended family (Rose and Shaw, 2008). However, if the migrant has employment success in the U.S., remittances may eventually exceed previous earnings in Mexico. Some nonmigrant women also begin new jobs in their partners' absence, further contributing to household resources (Aysa and Massey, 2004). Data in rural communities suggest that, on average, households with a U.S. migrant have more resources than those without (Mora-Rivera, 2012).

The migration of partnered men typically creates gaps in household authority and responsibility, often filled by their nonmigrant spouses. New tasks include increases in agricultural labor, oversight of household finances, and maintenance of the family's community responsibilities (Cohen, 2004; Kanaiaupuni, 2000b). Patriarchal relations have a long history in Mexican households and for some women, exercising new authority is valued (Echegoyén Nava, 2013b; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). This experience not universal however, and is particularly challenging when fulfilling these responsibilities is gender non-normative in the community (Boehm, 2008; Echegoyén Nava, 2013a). Kanaiaupuni writes that although her "initial expectations" were that assuming men's responsibilities would be "a sign of empowerment," she found that "for many poor women in rural Mexico, the added responsibilities are unwanted and exacerbate their already marginalized position in society" (2000b: 8).

The "opportunities" generated by spousal absence may also be curtailed by the extended family; women's behavior is often tightly monitored by in-laws, neighbors, and with the rise of communication technology, migrant spouses. When the couple disagrees, the migrant can enforce his preferences through threats to stop sending remittances—an outcome widely recognized as akin to marital abandonment (Arias, 2013). This threat is an often-referenced source of distress (Salgado de Snyder, 1993; Kanaiaupuni, 2000b).

Finally, spousal physical separation results in the loss of companionship and the introduction of worries about safety,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7332531>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7332531>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)